# Case studies of tutors' responses to student writing and the way in which students interpret these

**Thesis**

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the Degree of
**Master of Education**
of Rhodes University

by

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January 1994

# Abstract

This thesis examines tutor feedback on student essays to ascertain the extent to which these responses assist in teaching the academic and specific disciplinary conventions and to determine what is effective feedback and what is not. The investigation constituted an evaluation of a small sample of essays and the framework for this evaluation was developed from a study of current theories of literacy and language teaching. It was further informed by data gathered from interviews with students and tutors and questionnaires completed by them. This was done in order to establish how students interpret and react to feedback and to demonstrate the level of understanding between tutors and students in this mode of communication.

The conclusion was that tutor feedback can provide a valuable method for teaching the discourse of the discipline. However, results of the study revealed that communication often breaks down because tutors and students do not share a common language for talking about academic discourse and because students may not have understood the requirements of the task. In addition, the study found that responses to a small group of essays in the lowest mark category and written by second language students, were very inadequate. As the researcher, I concluded that graduate tutors were not well equipped for the task of dealing with these weaker essays. I have made suggestions for future research in this area and I believe that the data from this case study will provide valuable ideas for training tutors for responding to student essays.

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# Chapter One

# Introduction

## 1.1 Aims of the Research

This study looks at tutor feedback on student essays in a Social Science department at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in order to gain a better understanding of:

* how feedback is used to teach the discourse of a particular discipline in a tertiary institution

* the ways in which students interpret and react to tutor feedback in order to describe the level of understanding between tutors and students in this mode of communication

* what feedback is effective and what is not, in catering to the language and learning needs of all students, but particularly second language students

## 1.2 Description of the research project

The research project took the form of a case study. A sample of seventy-five first year Social Anthropology essays were collected and the tutor responses were analyzed for patterns and recurrences using various techniques, including a scheme adapted from Ballard and Clanchy (1988)(4.3 Description of the Ballard and Clanchy scheme). Twelve students were then interviewed to establish whether they had understood the feedback on their essays. These would be described as "focused" interviews (Yin 1984:83). In addition questionnaires were used to corroborate the data from the interviews. To confirm whether the students' interpretations had been accurate three tutors were interviewed.

## 1.3 Writing Instruction in the University

As Mason and Washington point out,

> ...writing dominates work in the humanities...it is on the analysis of printed texts, on the production of essays, and (above all) on written tests, that progress (however measured) largely depends. (1992:1)

And yet, the teaching of writing is not valued in the university. It is assumed by most academics that undergraduate university students should be able to write to the necessary standards, as writing should have been taught at secondary level. But this assumption fails to acknowledge that literacies are shaped by cultures and becoming literate in an institution like UCT means acquiring a new and very different discourse. Writing is fundamental to academic inquiry and teaching the discipline in the humanities should really be all about teaching the writing of the discipline; therefore we need to win a more acceptable place in the curriculum for the teaching of student writing (Rose 1985). One of the few places where students are given some instruction in writing is in the feedback on their essays but research shows that these comments are often not comprehensible to students (Sommer 1982; Hounsell 1987; Ballard and Clanchy 1988).

## 1.3 Writing Instruction at the University of Cape Town

Over the last ten to fifteen years, UCT has moved from being a traditionally white English-speaking university to a university with a heterogeneous student population and, in order to redress the imbalances of the past, student numbers have increased by approximately 40%. At the same time, shrinking resources have led to the freezing of academic posts and staffing has not kept pace with the increase in student numbers. To cope with this situation, postgraduate (and occasionally undergraduate) tutors have been used increasingly at the first year level. It is these tutors who are largely responsible for assessing and giving feedback on written work and they are often inexperienced, inadequately trained and poorly paid.

## 1.4 Origins and context of the research

This research project grew out of my interest in student writing. I have taught for a number of years on the English for Academic Purposes Course (EAP) at UCT where we have used the process approach to the teaching of writing (2.3.1 Research into the writing process). Writing teachers have become convinced that this approach enriches the teaching of writing and that feedback that is given in consultation with the student allows meaning to be mediated more successfully. However, this approach has not transferred to the mainstream for a number of reasons which I will outline in Chapter 2 (2.3.2 The teaching of writing in the mainstream). I was interested to know how effective the product-oriented feedback given in the mainstream disciplines was, and I was keen to understand more about the way this feedback helped to teach the conventions of the discipline.

The EAP course was started in 1982 and was one of the first courses to be set up as part of the broader Academic Support Programme (ASP). These programmes were begun in the traditionally white English speaking universities to promote the educational advancement of "underprepared" students, coming from Department of Education and Training (DET) schools. Schooling in DET schools had been driven by the oppressive goals of apartheid education and had inhibited these students from realising their academic potential. The EAP course was offered to students who were identified as being "at risk" for the reasons I have outlined above and because the medium of instruction at UCT was not their first language.

Over the last few years, as numbers of underprepared students increased at universities like UCT, a gradual shift has been taking place from "minority" support programmes to an "Academic Development" (AD) approach which aims to facilitate changes in the university's mainstream degree programmes so that courses and curricula take account of students' prior learning experiences and cater to increasing diversity in the student population (Scott 1993). This shift is also a recognition that it is not only black students from DET schools that have been disadvantaged through apartheid education and that curricula have had a very western and European focus which has neglected other relevant knowledge.

As part of the shift to this "infusion" model (Scott 1993), the design of mainstream courses will have to be informed by research in student language and learning, and the development of student writing should become a priority. Because of the role that post-graduate tutors now play in the university, there will be a need for more extensive tutor training and development. It will be important that tutors gain a deeper understanding of what it means to teach academic literacy to both first (L1) and second language (L2) speakers of English.[1]

Feedback is a teaching methodology that we have seldom questioned because we have always assumed that it helped to shape learning in the university and within the separate disciplines. Research into feedback is important as it will broaden our understandings of the role that feedback plays in the teaching of writing at tertiary level. It is hoped that my interpretation of the data from this research project will generate ideas for future research and be of assistance to those involved in developing tutor training programmes.

## 1.5 Structure of the thesis

This thesis examines tutor responses to student writing in terms of how effective they are in teaching the discourse of the discipline and it attempts to find out how students interpret these responses in order to establish whether effective communication is taking place by means of this feedback. In Chapter 2 the literature is reviewed in order to establish a framework

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[1] For many black students at UCT, English is a third or fourth language. However, for convenience in this thesis I will use the term "second language"students to refer to all students who do not have English as a first language.

against which to examine the data.

In Chapter 3 the research theory and methods for a case study are discussed. Problems and methods of the data collection process are described in detail because the reliability of case study research depends on careful documentation of procedures (Yin 1984). In keeping with the principles of democratic research, interpretations of the data were negotiated with those involved in the study and the findings were reported to the subjects for their comments (Walker 1986).

Chapter 4 begins the analysis of the case study data by focusing on the written feedback. A scheme used by Ballard and Clanchy (1988) has been adapted and used to study the way in which feedback teaches the discourse of the discipline. The feedback is evaluated in terms of its effectiveness in catering to the language and learning needs of the students.

Chapter 5, the second chapter in the analysis of the data, is based primarily on data from the interviews with students and tutors and looks at the measure of understanding and communication taking place between them.

Chapter 6 offers a critique of some aspects of the research process. In addition there is a brief summary of the findings in order to raise questions for future research.

In this thesis I have used the first person "I" to refer to myself, the researcher. I have done this in the interests of honesty and integrity because I believe that ethnographic research is interpretive and subjective by nature.

I have used the female pronoun "she" when the person referred to is of indeterminate gender, in order to make up for a lack of equity in the past. English has no neutral pronouns and I wanted to avoid using "he/she" which can be rather clumsy. However, I have not changed the gender in direct quotes.

# Chapter 2

# Theoretical Background

This chapter looks at the theoretical issues involved in writing instruction at universities in order to establish a framework for evaluating tutor responses to student writing. The literature will be discussed under the following headings:

**2.1    literacy in the university**

2.1.1  defining academic literacy

2.1.2  discourse and discourse communities

2.1.3  teaching the discourse of the discipline

**2.2    research into feedback**

2.2.1  studies of feedback in process writing

2.2.2  research that has informed my study

2.2.3  relevant South African research

**2.3    critique of product-oriented feedback**

2.3.1  research into the writing process

2.3.2  the teaching of writing in the mainstream

2.3.3  research in reading

**2.4    genre**

**2.5    conclusion**

## 2.1 Literacy in the university

### 2.1.1 Defining academic literacy

The central question that seems to underpin research into feedback on student writing relates to the way we define academic literacy. As Ruggles Gere (1980) points out, we need to understand the assumptions behind ways of responding to student writing, for example what understandings of the nature and function of writing do we have when we focus on certain features of the writing rather than others? And as Sommers (1982) asks, what messages do we give our students through our comments? This seems to depend on what we understand by literacy and particularly academic literacy.

Ballard and Clanchy (1988) have attempted to put together a new and more encompassing definition of academic literacy, so as to move the focus away from a concern with surface errors. As they point out, these surface errors are often connected to deeper problems of structure and understanding. It is often not that students do not know the correct forms, but that the complexity and difficulty of dealing with subject content may result in language breakdown[2]. The epistemology of the discipline, ways of knowing and ways of representing knowledge, are closely related to the language in which it is expressed, and if we are to improve the standards of student literacy, it is essential that we understand this relationship.

Ballard and Clanchy's notion that literacy relates to social practices is drawn from a body of research which Gee (1990) calls "the new literacy studies". This research has replaced traditional notions of literacy as simply the ability to read and write. Gee points out that there are multiple literacies and these are acquired through apprenticeship in different social situations where people read, write and speak in a variety of ways.

Ballard and Clanchy say that when a university student's literacy is formally assessed, it is

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[2]Recent research in South Africa by Yeld and Haeck(1993) and Inglis (1993) has confirmed that the cognitive demands of the task impact on students' language use.

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assessed in terms of how appropriate it is to the "culture" of the academic institution, so in order to be considered literate, students have to learn "to read the culture, learning to come to terms with its distinctive rituals, values, styles of language and behaviour." (1988:8). They have to learn the discourse and the culture of their academic institution, but as Ballard and Clanchy point out, they also have to learn the discourse of a number of different 'sub-cultures' in the university - the sub-cultures of the particular disciplines that they have chosen to study eg Physics or Sociology. Ballard and Clanchy have developed an outline of the elements of cognitive and linguistic competence that help to determine literacy in a discipline and it seems that this might be a useful framework to use in trying to analyze tutor responses. It will be described in more detail in the analysis of the data (4.3 <u>Description of the Ballard and Clanchy scheme</u>).

## 2.1.2 Discourse and discourse communities

The idea of discourse community seems important in understanding the notion of academic literacy and subject specific literacy and Herzberg gives a comprehensive definition:

> Use of the term 'discourse community' testifies to the increasingly common assumption that discourse operates within conventions defined by communities, be they academic disciplines or social groups. The pedagogies associated with writing across the curriculum and academic English now use the notion of 'discourse communities' to signify a cluster of ideas: that language use in a group is a form of social behaviour, that discourse is a means of extending the group's knowledge and of initiating new members into the group, and that discourse is epistemic or constitutive of the group's knowledge (Herzberg 1986:1, quoted in Swales 1990).

Thus the first-year students who were my research subjects in this study are in the process of becoming members of the discourse community of Social Anthropology and require careful guidance during their apprenticeship so that they learn the rules of the culture and can be accepted into it. Feedback on essays is one of the ways in which this guiding takes place. In a social constructivist view of writing and of knowledge, the discourse of the discipline will shape the type of feedback that is given, but at the same time feedback must be one of the ways in which the discourse continues to be shaped and changed. Thus, by looking at responses to student writing in Social Anthropology we should develop a better understanding of what Social Anthropologists regard as academic literacy.

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### 2.1.3 Teaching the discourse of the discipline

Ballard and Clanchy (1988) point out that the problem is that this apprenticeship is often not very effective. They say that feedback on essays is often the only way in which the rules and conventions of the discipline are communicated to new students and these comments on essays are often not explicit. They are written in an informal sort of language but they appeal to formal criteria. Ballard and Clanchy liken it to a secret code that has to be cracked before students understand how language and thinking should proceed in the discipline (1988). Nancy Sommers also refers to it as a "code":

> This uniform code of commands, requests and pleadings demonstrates that the teacher holds a license for vagueness while the student is commanded to be specific (1982:153).

Ballard and Clanchy (1988) suggest that the reason for this may be that it is often difficult for academics to objectify their own academic culture because the assumptions of their discipline have become internalised.

In his response to the Ballard and Clanchy paper, Bond (1993) puts forward another reason for the failure of academics to make the culture of the discipline explicit and he gives an idea of why the process of "acculturation" is more complex than it may at first seem. He says that in the university context we cannot

> ...assume the existence of a clear terrain waiting to be revealed for more effective student travel. In fact, it is often the case that some of the underlying assumptions of disciplines, are themselves the site of contestation between academics; hence the avoidance of explicit statements of such in introductory level courses. The result is often the obfuscating vagueness which reinforces the challenge facing new learners (Bond 1993:144).

## 2.2 Research into feedback

### 2.2.1 Studies of feedback in process writing

There is a considerable body of research that has studied feedback and its effectiveness. I will first attempt to summarise some of the research done overseas. Then I will look at recent studies done in South Africa and point to some of the ideas that seem particularly significant in the South African multicultural context.

Much of the literature in this field indicates that markers' comments are not useful and students often fail to understand them (Sommers 1982; Zamel 1985; Leki 1990). Zamel (1985) carried out a study to examine English as a second language (ESL) teachers' responses to student writing and she found that because ESL teachers tended to focus on surface-level features of the text, they responded to the text as a set of separate sentences rather than as a whole piece of discourse. As a result they often failed to notice the meaning-related problems. Studies of error correction have indicated that "global" errors or errors that interfere with the meaning of the message should receive top priority for correction (Hendrickson 1987:360). Zamel (1985:89) noted that because the teachers' comments were "vague and abstract", student writers found them difficult to interpret; students were told that there was something wrong but they were not offered clear strategies for correcting their texts. Sommers (1982:152) uses examples to illustrate that comments are not specific to each individual text; they could in fact be "rubber-stamped" from one text to another. She notes that in her research she observed similarities in the abstract comments made by different teachers. Leki (1990:66) has done a fairly recent review of research into feedback and she reports that research results are "inconclusive, sometimes contradictory, and, in L2 writing, sparse."

### 2.2.2 Research that has informed my study

Most of the research described above has looked at feedback which is given by language teachers at the draft stage of the writing process. My study is rather different. It has looked at feedback given by content teachers at the end-product stage and, therefore, I was more

interested in similar studies or research that could inform my investigation.

Some recent research has shown that students often fail to understand teachers' responses to their writing because they have not understood what the teacher was looking for in the first place. Sheeran and Barnes (1991:1) discuss this problem in the context of the school and they point out that students who write well, do so because they have penetrated what they call the "unspoken ground rules". They suggest that teachers may be unaware of these ground rules themselves and I think this may be true in situations where inexperienced tutors are teaching first-year students. They also suggest that the teachers often simply assume that students share an understanding of the ground rules.

Schwartz (1984) did an investigation into what lecturers in the various university disciplines value in writing and found there was little match between what lecturers want and what students think they want. She also came to the conclusion that rhetorical values were badly articulated in the faculties. She says that generalised statements on student essays such as, "never use I" or "vague" give the impression that there is a universally agreed upon standard and consensus and this is misleading for students. Staff need to acknowledge to their students that this is not true and that lecturers give their personal and professional views when they respond to student assignments and these change according to the particular context (2.1.3 Teaching the discourse of the discipline).

In an illuminating study of the ways in which misunderstandings arise in the feedback on essays, Hounsell (1987) noted that communication between tutors and some students was breaking down. Students misunderstood tutors' comments because they did not grasp taken-for-granted assumptions about the nature of academic discourse. In addition he found that even when students did understand what seemed to be required and could give an acceptable definition of, for example an essay of argument, they did not know how to apply this definition in their essays.

Hounsell (1987) found that students' conceptions of what academic essay writing is varied tremendously and that there were parallels between students' conceptions of essay writing and their approaches to learning. Students who are concerned to abstract meaning in their essays,

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what Hounsell (1987:112) calls the "interpretative conception" of essay writing, are also the students who adopt a deep approach to learning.

Hounsell (1987:117) was concerned that feedback had a washback effect on student learning. He said that students became "locked into a cycle of deprivation as far as constructive feedback is concerned" and so they viewed essay writing as a chore and put very little effort into it. Because the feedback "fails to connect" it is often ignored or treated as very insignificant. Cohen and Cavalcanti (1990) report that their case studies of teacher feedback revealed very little use of praise.

Does this mean that feedback has no useful role to play in writing instruction? Hounsell believes it does and that the problem with the feedback he studied was that it was product-oriented and students viewed it as an assessment activity. He believes that the context of essay writing must change and that feedback should be process-oriented. He says that what comprises academic discourse can never have absolute clarity or a precise definition; therefore it depends on dialogue to guide an understanding of it. Students have to be given the space to question and explore the tacit requirements on a regular basis. At the feedback stage of the writing process, tutors can find out what the students thought the requirements were and get insight into pupils preconceptions and misunderstandings. This two way dialogue also helps the student to become adept at reading the mind of the tutor and this is important as there will still be many instructions left unspoken. This will help the tutor bridge the gap and avoid misunderstandings (Hounsell 1987). The discussion of process and product will be taken further in 2.3.1 Research into the writing process, which offers a critique of product-oriented feedback.

### 2.2.3 Relevant South African research

There has been relatively little research done into feedback in South Africa, but there is a growing awareness that evaluation and feedback need attention in situations where student numbers are increasing (Murray 1993b; Baijnath 1993). Baijnath notes that:

Large numbers often have a drastic effect on the quality of assessment students are

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subjected to. For a lecturer labouring under a teaching load of many hundreds, the depth of feedback given to students is invariably shallow...Where tutors are being used to do marking, there is often lack of consistency in the criteria used and in the quality of feedback (Baijnath 1993:2).

Boughey and Goodman's study (1993), which was carried out at the University of the Western Cape, is valuable from this point of view. They set out to find ways of giving feedback at the draft stage of the writing process which are effective but not too time-consuming. Parkinson and Mattson (1992) studied feedback at the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg. They were interested in what could be learnt in order to improve marking practices as well as teaching practices in their department. By analysing responses they were able to identify aspects of the poetry curriculum which were problematic for students because they were not being made explicit.

There is concern in the South African context that the dominant institutional discourse has the capacity to marginalise and subordinate non-traditional students because, as Gee (1990) points out, Discourses give effect to value systems and construct power relations. Moll and Slonimsky (1989:161) illustrate how the "groundrules" for success in a historically white university in South Africa present a problem for students from DET schools because their education has not given them access to these ground rules and they say that the rote-learning context of the DET has meant that "educational activity has... been homogenised into one groundrule 'replicate what is given'". They attempt to outline the complex groundrules that students would have to master if they are to succeed on the Wits University BEd program.

In a similar vein, but referring to the University of Natal, Craig says:

we are compelled to make explicit the usually implicit rules of the game to those who come with different 'rules' or who have developed in a different eco-cultural niche. (1989:171)

Morrow seems to echo this sentiment with his notion of "epistemological access" or "access to the goods which the university distributes" (1993:3). Bond (1993) questions the uncritical way in which educationalists in South Africa seem to have accepted the notion of transforming everybody to be academically literate, a sort of unquestioning "taking on" of

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these hegemonic discourses. There is a danger that in this process other discourses are discounted. Rose (cited in Cazden 1992) recommends that traditional academic prose should be enriched by changes and appropriations from non-traditional students.

## 2.3 Critique of product-oriented feedback

It is necessary to outline recent theories of writing to illustrate why researchers believe that responding to writing as a product limits the effectiveness of that response and distorts the teaching of writing. Responding then becomes an assessment or judging activity, rather than a pedagogic one.

### 2.3.1 Research into the writing process

Research into the process of writing has shown that the process is not linear but cyclical and recursive because experienced writers move back and forth, drafting and revising (Emig 1977; Raimes 1985). Researchers also found that writing was a process of discovering meaning (Zamel 1982) because writers revise and rewrite to clarify and refine their meaning. Writing is "the record of an idea developing ...a process whereby an initial idea gets extended and refined." (Shaughnessy 1977:234). Writing teachers and researchers believed that the problem with inexperienced student writers was that they felt that they had to get it right first time and became so concerned with form that they were inhibited and did not feel free to explore and experiment in the process of creating meaning. Zamel (1982) found that this was particularly true of ESL writers who were insecure about their ability to express themselves accurately in English.

This research led to a new approach to the teaching of writing called the process approach where students are taught that writing needs to evolve over a period of time and a number of drafts and that it is not important to focus on form in the early stages but rather to concentrate on getting the meaning clear and organising one's ideas. In the process approach to the teaching of writing, intervention at the revision stage of the process is important because research has shown that advice about writing in progress is more valuable than if it is given before or after (Flower 1979). Students discuss their writing with a reader who

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communicates his problems and misunderstandings and in this way the writer will discover whether or not she has succeeded in communicating her purpose to the reader. On the basis of this feedback, the student rewrites. This feedback and dialogue is an important form of mediation, where a skilled reader can make use of Vygotsky's notion of the zone of proximal development (1978), to extend students' learning; the teacher can guide the student by questioning and clarification so that she learns to express her meaning more effectively. Through interacting with others, the process will eventually become internalised and the student will learn to write for an audience and become a questioning reader so that she is able to critically evaluate her own essay.

One of the most important findings of the research into the writing process was that writing was seen as a tool for learning, a meaningful way of making sense of new knowledge and not just a means of demonstrating that something had been learnt. This is not a new idea, psychologists such as Luria and Vygotsky, noted that higher cognitive functions seem to develop most fully only with the support of verbal language and particularly written language. In *Thought and Language* Vygotsky says that writing is an extension of inner speech and it makes demands on the learner because he has to engage in a " deliberate structuring of the web of meaning" (1962:100).

## 2.3.2 The teaching of writing in the mainstream

This approach to the teaching of writing has been widely used by language and writing teachers and most writing teachers believe that it has enriched the teaching and learning of writing (Angelil-Carter and Thesen 1990). However, the process approach has not transferred to the academic writing context where writing in the disciplines is still product-oriented and seen as an assessment activity. There are a number of reasons for this which I will attempt to outline.

The first point relates to the traditional notion held by most content teachers that the teaching of writing is not their responsibility. As Taylor says, "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" (1988:6). Rose (1985) calls this the "myth of

transience" because he says that academics believe that the source of the "literacy problem" lies elsewhere - in the teaching in high schools or in the students' families and therefore it is not their responsibility and can be ignored or dealt with temporarily in an add-on writing class. But, as research continues to emerge showing that language and literacy are closely intertwined with ways of knowing in the disciplines (2.1.1 <u>Defining Academic Literacy</u>), the pressure is mounting for academia to redefine writing, affirm its relation to inquiry and find a central place for it in the curriculum. (Rose 1985).

In addition, a process approach to the teaching of writing has major implications for curriculum design because it represents a move away from traditional notions of teaching. The teacher is no longer seen as transmitter of knowledge but learning must become student-centred as teachers and students work together as active agents in the writing and learning process. From quite a practical point of view, if a process approach to writing is adopted, it may mean fewer essays can be written, because essay writing, drafting and revising becomes a more time-consuming process. However, it may also mean that less time needs to be spent teaching/lecturing content because, through writing, students learn to explore the content, make the connections and probe the subject matter in a very meaningful way and they learn to use these tools independently. Content teachers' comments on essays can support and scaffold student learning; they can suggest the next steps that could be taken to penetrate the subject further and encourage students' intellectual activities to grow (Knoblauch and Brannon 1983).

And finally, a move to process writing would mean more work for the postgraduate tutors, who do most of the marking of first year essays. Process writing with the multiple readings of essays, consultation and dialogue it requires, is undoubtedly more demanding for the teacher; and tutors in our universities are notoriously overworked and underpaid. Solutions would have to be found for these kinds of problems. But more fundamentally, these are issues that attack our traditional notions of "the university" and the way it functions. Educational institutions are resistant to change, but as I have pointed out in my introduction, these are changing times and there are signs that many outdated notions of teaching and learning in the university are being shifted and new ones are being accommodated (1.4 <u>Origins and context of the research)</u>.

## 2.3.3 Research in reading

Recent research into reading has provided more substantial theoretical justification for responding to student writing as if it were part of a process. Reading research has shown us that our responses may not be shaped entirely by the text we read. Schema theory and interactive theories of reading stress that the reader is not simply the passive recipient of text but, instead, she constructs meaning from the text and plays an active role in this. The reader's background knowledge influences her interpretation and construction of meaning in the text. This happens when teachers evaluate a text and it explains why readers of the same student text differ so much in their responses. We each "bring different experiences and expectations to the text and therefore find different meanings in it" (Griffin 1982:297).

Thus it is quite conceivable that the tutor, responding to a student text may lose sight of the student's purpose in writing the text and misread it because her reading of the essay is coloured by her own knowledge and experiences. Because of this risk of misinterpretation and misreading in the process of responding to student writing, it seems even more important that the student who is being judged is not just the silent recipient of that judgment, but is given a voice. White describes the impact that this knowledge must have on the way teachers react to student writing.

> Once we accept the necessity of "misreading", as the post-structuralists use the term, we tend to be less sure of the objectivity of our reading and more ready to grant to the student possible intentions or insights not yet present on the page. Even more important, we respond with questions rather than with judgment (or invective!), since our aim is to urge the student back into "the chaotic process of textuality" (that is the flux of ideas behind the writing), where revision occurs.(White 1984:191)

Not only do our experiences and background knowledge influence the way we read student texts, but, because we are teachers, we also read student texts with certain expectations. Sommers (1982) notes that teachers do not read student texts in the same way that they read a literary piece, which they would read and interpret for meaning. Instead they read student writing with certain preconceived ideas; they expect to find errors and so this is what they look for. White says that teachers belong to a particular "interpretive community" which has a set of assumptions and strategies for approaching student text. He believes this interpretive

community is outdated, and only once teachers change what we ask for and expect in student writing can we hope to get anything different.

Critical linguists like Kress (1992) believe that all texts, both written and spoken have a social origin and can be explained in terms of the social context in which they are made. Therefore when a teacher responds to a student text she should ask herself questions such as: Who produced the text? In what context was it produced and under what constraints? He stresses that texts produced by students are no exception to this rule. We may only find the answers to these questions when we engage our students in dialogue as part of the writing process.

## 2.4 Genre

The "process approach" has been supplemented in recent times by a "genre-based approach" to the teaching of writing, to allow students to develop a clearer understanding of rhetorical text structure. The new teaching methodology has been informed by research that has analyzed and described the various genres, particularly those of an academic nature. Thus Swales (1984; 1990) and Dudley-Evans (1986) have focused on scientific research articles and Hyland (1990) has developed an analysis of the argumentative essay. This methodology does not represent a move away from the process approach as Hyland is quick to point out:

> Examining texts as finished products in no way implies a product-oriented approach or the teaching of prescriptive formulae. On the contrary, control over the conventions of a genre is a prerequisite for creativity...(1992:16)

The genre-based approach seems very valuable, particularly for teaching second language students because they are often disadvantaged when the genres they are required to produce are entirely new to them (Hyland 1992:16). Familiarising a student with the genre so that they understand the way the text should be structured and know how to apply the rules and conventions, seems to be one more way of making the "rules of the game" (Craig 1989) explicit. (2.2.3 Relevant South African research)

This approach is particularly relevant for the tertiary context because the university demands

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very specific genres. The academic essay itself, is a peculiarly complex creature and yet we have assumed that students should know how to cope with it. Womack's article *What are essays for?* helps to denaturalize the academic essay genre by looking at its historical development. He gives such an apt description of its paradoxes that I will quote him in full:

> The practical form of these contradictions is a perpetual mixed message to the student writer about how much autonomy she is expected to show. On the one hand, we want her own thoughts and responses: independent thought, freshness, originality, are not only permitted, but tirelessly demanded in examiners' reports. On the other hand, there's an equal insistence that every assertion be supported by evidence of intensive and extensive reading, that the language of the essay be 'appropriate', that the handling of contentious issues be balanced - in short, that the expression of independence of mind be thoroughly permeated by signs of conformity to an academic code of practice. The inevitable stress signal of this tension is plagiarism. Bewildered or exhausted by the requirement that she should be herself and simultaneously approximate to a model outside herself, the candidate produces the contradiction in the form of deception - she *literally* adopts the voice of another as her own. The difference between this prohibited form of pretence and the pretence which is essential to the genre is tiny; the boundary between them is policed with predictable anxiety.
> (Womack 1993:46)

It is interesting that Womack sees plagiarism as the indication of a tension between a demand for originality on the one hand and a need to adhere to the academic code on the other.

Referencing is a convention peculiar to the academic genre and one which first-year students find perplexing; failure to reference frequently leads to plagiarism as students borrow the words of another writer without acknowledging them. Because feedback at first-year level often focuses on referencing and plagiarism, I would like to examine these aspects of academic writing, in an attempt to develop a better understanding of why it is that students plagiarise.

### 2.4.1 Referencing

Swales (1990) has attempted to develop an understanding of referencing by tracing its history and showing how its purpose seems to have changed, and he speculates about the rationale for citation in the written academic genre. He considers that references may be given for

ethical reasons to acknowledge the ideas of another writer or to pay respect to a previous writer or as a persuasive tool to strengthen an argument and finally he suggests that it is a way to show that a writer is familiar with the field and therefore equipped to belong to a particular discourse community (Swales 1990).

### 2.4.2 Plagiarism

For first year students that pressure to belong to the group is what is particularly strong; they try to show they belong by plagiarising but they are not yet sufficiently skilled with the language or familiar with the rules to legitimise their borrowing. Hull and Rose (1989:147, quoted in Cazden 1992) comment on their student, Tanya's plagiarism as she struggles to construct a summary and remark that "something profoundly literate is going on". And they go on to remind us that we, as writers do something very similar:

> [Our own] clearly documented writing may let us forget, or even camouflage, how much more it is that we borrow from existing texts, how much we depend on membership in a community for our language, our voice, our very arguments. We forget that we, like Tanya, continually appropriate each other's language to establish group membership, to grow, and to define ourselves in new ways, and that such appropriation is a fundamental part of language use, even as the appearance our texts belie (sic) it. (Hull and Rose 1989:152, quoted in Cazden 1992)

Cazden (1992) draws on Bakhtin's notion of "voices" in a powerful way to underline how difficult it is to acquire a new discourse. Bakhtin says:

> Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated - overpopulated - with the intentions of others. Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one's own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process. (Bakhtin 1981: 294, quoted in Cazden 1992)

The reason that I have quoted Bakhtin here, rather than paraphrasing what he said, is because I feel I would not be able to express it as well as he has. I have not yet appropriated this notion and made it my own - it is populated with his intentions.

Bakhtin's quote helps us to understand that journey that we travel from the time that we first

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hear a new discourse, along a tortuous and uncertain path while we learn to make it our own. Students who are accused of plagiarism are simply trying on the new clothes at a stage in the process of appropriating the language as their own, and we, as teachers, need to see it as just that - a step toward becoming literate in the new discourse.

Bakhtin says that word meanings flow not just from the immediate situation but from the culture. He talks about words having a "stylistic aura" and he says that "this aura belongs not to the word of language as such but to that genre in which the given word usually functions" (Bakhtin 1986:97, quoted in Cazden 1992). He calls voice the "speaking consciousness" as it carries with it values and the culture. This is why it is difficult to make alien voices our own. Different voices may conflict and voices may reflect power relations and make it painful for us to acquire them.

Bakhtin's theories help us appreciate the difficulties of acquiring new discourses, but they also seem to indicate how important it is for teachers to make the ground rules explicit. Teachers need to help students understand the university and its strange, inherited canons, where they come from and what the effects of not following them might be. At the same time, it is important to make students aware that there are places where there is space and flexibility and there are opportunities for "probing and shifting existing conventions" (Fairclough 1992:54).

## 2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has looked at theoretical issues relating to feedback on student writing in order to establish a framework for evaluating tutor responses. In the university a student's literacy is assessed in terms of how appropriate it is to the culture of the institution and of the discipline. But at the tertiary level the conventions of this culture are seldom taught; in fact, feedback on essays is one of the few places where this kind of advice is given. What seems to emerge from research into feedback is that the reader's response is a crucial part of writing instruction and a student's writing will progress and improve if this stage is handled well, however there are indications that feedback often fails to communicate. Much of the research indicates that the reason feedback fails is because it is product-oriented and viewed

as an assessment activity; responding to writing as a product limits the effectiveness of the response. Reasons why the process approach has not transferred to the university's mainstream are outlined in section 2.3.2. Reading research has shown that even teachers may misread student writing and this gives further support to the argument that markers should make some attempt to negotiate meaning with the student. It seems that the success of the feedback stage depends fairly heavily on the preparation that has gone on beforehand to ensure that tutor and students speak the same language and that the ground rules are made explicit. One aspect of this might be to ensure that students are familiar with the genre of the academic essay, particularly its rules for referencing. The last section of the chapter is devoted to a discussion of referencing and plagiarism.

# Chapter Three

# Research theory and methods

This chapter will deal with:

3.1    **the choice of research method for describing the role of feedback in writing instruction**

3.1.1  educational research paradigm

3.1.2  choice of a research paradigm

3.1.3  the case study

3.2    **description of the context**

3.2.1  reasons for working in the social anthropology   department

3.2.2  the social anthropology department

3.2.3  changes in the social anthropology department

3.3    **a description of the context of essay writing in the department**

3.3.1  preparation for writing essays

3.3.2  essay marking workshop

3.3.3  feedback tutorial

3.4    **data collection**

3.4.1  collection of written data for analysis

3.4.2  interviews with the students

3.4.3  interviews with the tutors

3.4.4  data base

3.5    **problems encountered in carrying out the study**

3.5.1  interviewing

3.5.2  the "halo" effect

## 3.1   The choice of research method for describing the role of feedback in writing instruction

### 3.1.1 Educational research paradigms

In educational research there are two quite distinct paradigms. The positivist, normative model aims at objectivity by adopting the procedures and methods of the scientific world. In response to dissatisfaction with the positivist model, there has been increasing use of ethnography in educational research. The interpretative philosophy underlying ethnography is very different from the positivist beliefs that have influenced educational research. The interpretative model is characterised by a description of events that occur within the life of a group with special concern for social structures and the behaviour of individuals within the group (Keeves 1988). The two perspectives make different assumptions about the world and have different notions of what constitute valid and appropriate data for understanding the universe. Depending on which perspective one supports, one will identify certain issues as being of interest and ignore others (Cohen and Manion 1980). This leads one to ask certain questions and to pursue the methods that seem appropriate.

Hitchcock and Hughes (1989) have summarised some of the criticisms that have been levelled against the positivist tradition. They say that the positivists have tended to make human beings into "things" because they draw on the scientific method with its emphasis on correlation laws and objectivity. And, in their search for quantifiable data, researchers working in the positivist tradition have tended to destroy or ignore the qualitative data out of which all "data" emerge, so they limit the perspective of the research. The interpretative, ethnographic model of research uses a variety of sources of data, both qualitative and quantitative, as well as different data-analysis strategies. Van Lier (1988:54) describes one understanding of ethnographic research as being "Janus faced" because it looks both ways by using both kinds of data. Where the two traditions differ is in the attitude to the data.

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Thus the problem with quantitative data lies not so much in the data itself, but in the way it is used. Hitchcock and Hughes say that "quantitative data on school and classroom processes needs to be supplemented by contextual details supplied by interpretive qualitative techniques" (1989:38).

Research is never neutral whatever the paradigm one is working in. However, another difference between the two models is that traditionally the positivist researcher has been seen as adopting a detached and neutral role. In contrast, the interpretive researcher recognises the inevitable participation of the researcher and, although objectivity is the goal, it is recognised as being difficult to achieve. Consequently, it is important for the interpretive researcher to be conscious of her own constructedness and to remain critical of her interpretations.

### 3.1.2 Choice of a research paradigm

In chapter 2 (2.1.1 Defining Academic Literacy) I described how the assumptions that shaped our understandings of literacy have changed since the 1960's and 1970's and this has been parallelled by a shift in the kinds of research methodologies that have been used to understand literacy. Twenty years ago literacy was thought of as a set of decoding and thinking skills and it was assumed that learning to be literate had a lot to do with individual initiative and motivation. The research methods used were largely experimental and often drew from the field of cognitive psychology (Beach et al 1992). Now in the 1990's literacy is seen as being shaped by institutional forces such as the school and the home; and ethnographical, descriptive and observational research methods have been used to develop a broader understanding of this new concept of literacy.

Those doing research into literacy considered that the experimental approach to research was too constraining of the literacy event and they needed an alternative research method that captured the complexities of the event of writing. As the papers from the 1990 National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) conference, dealing with "perspective on literacy" illustrate, our concept of literacy has been enhanced by drawing on perspectives from such disciplines as cultural anthropology, social psychology, sociolinguistics, critical theory and

post structuralist criticism. Beach et al (1992) say that in order to really begin to unlock the complexities of learning to read and write, we probably need a multidisciplinary approach.

My understanding of literacy and knowledge is a social constructivist one and because of the nature of this research project, I have chosen to locate my research in the interpretive framework. In this research project, I wanted to study the phenomenon of feedback in its naturally occurring setting, to examine the data in an exploratory way and perhaps to be able to make some theoretical observations. Cohen and Manion (1980) say that in the interpretive tradition, data is the source of hypothesis and precedes any theorising.

### 3.1.3 The case study

George Yin (1984) claims that the type of research question posed and the extent of control the researcher has over behavioural events is what defines the method that will be used. The research questions that I chose to ask, such as

*     What kinds of feedback are effective and why ?
*     How do students, especially underprepared students, interpret and react to comments on their essays?

would be categorised by Yin, as "how" or "why" questions and he says these kinds of research questions are likely to lead to the use of case studies (1984:20).

Yin's definition of the case study attempts to distinguish it from other research strategies:

> it is an empirical inquiry that:
> *     investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context; when
> *     the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident and in which
> *     multiple sources of evidence are used (1984: 23)

My aim was to describe a particular teaching intervention in the real life context in which it occurred and to report it with accuracy and understanding. I chose to look at feedback on

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essays written in the first year Social Anthropology course. I believed that a small scale, but in-depth study of the ways in which feedback communicates would be more revealing than studying large numbers of essays and sending out questionnaires.

According to Yin (1984), the case study differs from other research strategies in that it relies on a rich understanding of the context because the context and the phenomenon are not clearly separated. This is in contrast to the experimental method, which deliberately divorces the phenomenon from its context, so that attention can be focused on just a few variables. Survey procedures, on the other hand, can try to deal with phenomenon and context but their ability to examine the context is very restricted because the researcher has to limit the number of variables to be analyzed. The case study methodology allows the researcher to take a careful and holistic look at a phenomenon and to understand the complexity and dynamic nature of the particular entity within its context.

Critics of the case study argue that single cases offer a poor basis for generalisation. Yin (1984) points out that case study research leads to analytical generalisation which means that the researcher is not generalising results to other case studies, but rather to some broader theory. The data I have collected will not necessarily be generalisable to other situations but it may lead to the posing of some important questions which arise out of the research.

## 3.2 Description of the context

In order to situate the study, I will explain why I chose to work in the Social Anthropology Department and give a brief description of the discipline. At the same time, I will attempt to build an understanding of the changing context of the University of Cape Town which has had an impact on the study.

### 3.2.1 Reasons for working in the Social Anthropology Department

The shift from academic support to the infusion model of Academic Development had meant that language development staff were being encouraged to work with mainstream lecturers and tutors to build an understanding of the language-related needs of the students (1.4 Origins

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and context of the research). Social Anthropology had been identified as one department where, as yet, there were no language staff working.

Secondly, the EAP Course where I had been teaching, has close connections with the Social Sciences because it strives to lay a foundation for studying in this area by teaching academic reading and essay writing and, simultaneously, building an understanding of key concepts in the Social Sciences.

Finally, I was particularly interested to find out whether second language students from DET schools, understood and could use comments on their essays effectively. Social Anthropology has a large proportion of black students in the first-year course. In 1993, 41% of the first year students were black and of those, 22,6% came from DET schools.

### 3.2.2 The Social Anthropology Department

Social Anthropology or "the study of humanity" focuses on understanding human interaction in social groupings eg. families, communities, nations. The concept of "culture" is central to Social Anthropology as it strives to comprehend the different values and norms in societies and contribute to the solution of social problems even if simply by asking the right questions. In the past, Social Anthropologists were mainly concerned with ethnography of exotic, small-scale, pre-literate societies but, increasingly, the techniques used for studying "others" have been used for studying ourselves and our fellow citizens.

The methods of discovery and modes of analysis used by anthropologists, such as fieldwork and participant observation have made a contribution to research methodology in many other disciplines. Social Anthropology differs from Sociology in its methods of inquiry and modes of analysis. Sociology is more concerned with large scale studies of Western urbanised societies.

The Social Anthropology Department at UCT comes under the Faculty of Social Science. When I began my research, a new Head of Department had been appointed in Social Anthropology. I had an interview with her in order to get permission to conduct my research;

she read my research proposal and said that she felt the department would welcome this kind of research.

The department has a small staff and staff members carry a heavy teaching load. All lecturers are required to tutor the first-year Social Anthropology course; this is a fairly unusual situation in Arts and Social Sciences at UCT as lecturers are not normally required to tutor first-year students.

There has been a certain amount of resistance to the intervention of Academic Development workers from lecturers in the department. However, the focus of my research was on post-graduate tutors and it is generally recognised that tutors are inexperienced and training programmes need to be established for them. Prior to 1993, tutors in Social Anthropology were given virtually no training.

Tutors at UCT generally complain of being overworked and underpaid and increasingly they are being made responsible for the tutoring and assessment in first year Arts and Social Science courses (1.4 Writing Instruction at the University of Cape Town). Some tutors have two tutorial groups which means that each tutor has to give two first-year tutorials every week and mark about 22 essays each time a first year essay is handed in. The four formal essays, four projects or assignments and two class tests count for 50% of the final year mark.

As I have pointed out earlier, the first-year course in Social Anthropology attracts large numbers of black students who, because of poor schooling, are underprepared for university study. This course had had some problems in previous years because there had been a high failure rate among the black students. The ASP tutor pointed out to me that Anthropology is appealing to black students, because in the first-year course they study aspects of South African black society and culture to which students can relate. However, she explained that it is also problematic for them because it challenges a lot of views that students might have been socialised into and it does not replace them.

### 3.2.3 Changes in the Social Anthropology Department

Partly as a response to these problems, there have been a number of changes to the first - year course in 1993 and I think it is important that these are described so that the reader gets a broad picture of the changing context in which the research has taken place. For the first time this year, Social Anthropology has had a funded ASP tutor, who has been able to offer supplementary assistance to underprepared students. Changes in ASP and the move toward the infusion model of Academic Development have meant that the newly appointed Education Development Officer (EDO) in Arts and Social Sciences has been able to work quite intensively with the department and with the ASP tutor, to implement changes in the first - year curriculum.

The first-year course was changed from two semesterised courses to a whole-year course. The ASP tutor and the EDO have developed a diagnostic test which students in the first-year course write at the beginning of the academic year. The purpose of this test is to identify "at risk" students who are then advised to attend the weekly ASP tutorial in Social Anthropology on a voluntary basis.

### 3.3 A description of the context of essay writing in the department

The question of how tutors respond to student writing relates to the broader issue of the context in which university students learn to write. Therefore I believe it is important to have a clear understanding of the background to essay writing in the department.

There have been changes to the way in which essays were written and marked in the department. One of these changes has been the introduction of a system of random marking whereby tutors do not mark the essays of students in their own tutorials. This system was introduced so that students would have a variety of tutors marking their essays as it was thought that this would be more equitable. This has had advantages and disadvantages which I will deal with in the discussion of the research findings. The ASP tutor has also introduced a system whereby marks for each essay are broken down into categories such as content, structure, expression, presentation and a record is kept of them (For student mark record see

Appendix A). It is hoped that this will allow the department to identify a student who is having problems in a particular area so that the problems can be resolved.

A description of the criteria used for marking Social Anthropology essays (Appendix B) was added to the departmental handbook this year in order to help students understand what it is that their tutors expect in an essay. This had been developed by the staff in Social Anthropology, working in collaboration with the Education Development Officer.

### 3.3.1 Preparation for writing essays

I was interested to know what preparation students were given for the writing of an essay and what preparation tutors were given for marking. The ASP tutor in the Department told me that no formal provision was made in the tutorial timetable for preparation for the essay; however she said that a week or two before the first essay was due to be handed in, most tutors would devote some time at the end of the tutorial to responding to questions about the essay and the essay title. She later reported to me that when students in her regular tutorial were given the opportunity to ask questions, they said that they had not yet done their readings and so they had no questions. She had made some brief suggestions about how they might structure the essay and how they might integrate the different readings (For essay title see Appendix C or 4.4.1 Mode of analysis).

The students in the ASP tutorial were given much more guidance in preparation for writing the essay. They were given a preparatory exercise which consisted of a sample student response to a very similar essay question. Students were asked to identify problems within this sample answer, which related to content and argument, paragraph structure, expression, and referencing. Working in pairs, the students were then asked to state how these could be corrected and improved. This was in an attempt to help the students develop an understanding of the criteria that would be used for marking the essay. The ASP tutor said that she felt that the criteria in the handbook prepare the students broadly for the writing of essays but do not give them an idea of what markers will be focusing on in any particular essay.

### 3.3.2 Essay marking workshop

Another innovation this year was that an essay marking workshop was held in the Department to prepare tutors for the marking of the first essay. The purpose of the workshop was to get tutors to identify and clarify what the criteria are for placing essays in different categories of evaluation ie first, upper second. This was run by the Education Development Officer. In preparation for the workshop, tutors had been given three essays from a previous exam to mark and assign grades to, and it was suggested that they write a comment explaining why they had awarded this particular mark. In groups, the tutors then discussed the marks they had assigned to the essays and attempted to justify each mark. Finally, in each group the tutors listed the characteristics which distinguished each mark category. They were then asked to note any serious discrepancies in marking and suggest reasons for this. The groups shared their findings and summarised the criteria which could be used to identify each category. I attended this workshop and noted that there was very little consistency in the criteria tutors used for allocating marks. The marks allocated by the twelve tutors ranged from fail to upper second or first in the case of each of the essays. This led one tutor to remark that allocation of marks seemed to be rather like "bingo". The table below shows the range of marks that these essays were given.

Essay one       Fail - 78 (mark allocated in original exam - 65)
Essay two       Fail - 65 (  "  "   ""    ""       - 20)
Essay three      Fail - 85 (  "  "   ""    ""       - 74)

One tutor asked whether ASP students should be marked differently. There was no direct response to this question, although a tutor did remark later that she felt they should not be "soft" on ASP students. It was agreed that no one should fail on the basis of language alone and that ideas should be rewarded, regardless of poor expression.

The workshop ended with the ASP tutor giving some guidelines for the evaluation of the first essay. She indicated that it would be acceptable if students chose to deal with each of the three readings they had chosen as separate case studies, but that the readings had to be drawn together in the conclusion (For outline of workshop see Appendix D).

### 3.3.3 Feedback tutorial

It is important to note that, in addition to the written feedback on each essay, there was a tutorial set aside for discussion of the essay when these were returned. In order to understand what kind of feedback was given in these tutorials, I asked permission to observe one of them. The one I attended was given by a tutor that I later interviewed.

The tutor tried to point out common problems he had found in the essays he had marked. He dealt with general criticisms of the essays, such as lack of planning and a tendency to summarise the readings, instead of responding to the task. He covered technical problems in referencing, use of tenses and essay presentation. Furthermore, he emphasized that in Social Anthropology one needed to be careful of the use of social categories and racial terms, therefore it was important to clarify terminology and concepts used.

I am doubtful as to whether this was a useful exercise. The random marking system meant the tutor had not marked the essays of the students in his tutorial and they probably did not feel that his observations applied to them personally. Moreover, it was at least three weeks since students had handed in the essays and they did not appear to be very interested in the feedback. To his credit, the tutor did give students an opportunity to speak to him after the tutorial about issues regarding their own individual essays. One or two students made use of this opportunity.

### 3.4. Data Collection

The data collection process for the case study is more complex than the processes used in other research strategies because the researcher must ensure that there is quality control in the data collection process. It is important that the data collected reflects a concern for construct validity and reliability. For a case study to pass the construct validity test, the researcher needs to ensure that she has developed "correct operational measures" for her study so that she does not have to rely on her own subjective judgments (Yin 1984:37). Yin lists three strategies that case study researchers can use to increase the construct validity of a study:

*     use multiple sources of evidence
*     establish chain of evidence
*     have key informants review draft case study report (Yin 1984:36)

The goal of reliability is to ensure that if the test were repeated by another investigator, she would arrive at the same findings and conclusions. However, as Walker (1986) points out it is difficult to reproduce educational situations. Yin (1984) and Walker (1986) suggest that the best way for case study researchers to approach the reliability problem is to document procedures carefully and to develop a case study data base.

In order to refine my plans for data collection, I conducted a pilot study at the end of 1992 in my own department, English for Academic Purposes. I selected my own department as the case for this pilot study because it was convenient and I had easy access to student essays and feedback. I studied feedback on twelve student essays and interviewed two students. I found this pilot study very useful as I learnt a lot about the practical details of carrying out research and it helped me to develop more precise and relevant questions. I realised that it would be essential to interview the tutor as well as the students. This pilot study was recorded in a research journal.

It is important in a case study, that the methods and procedures are made "explicit and visible" to all participants in the study, if the case is to be considered ethical (Walker 1986:209). During the preparation stages of the research I was given an opportunity to present a description of the research project to the tutors and lecturers in Social Anthropology. I described the research as "a case study of essay writing and feedback on essays and the ways in which students interpret feedback". I outlined the methodology that would be used and told the tutors that if they preferred not to have their feedback studied, they should let me know. The students were also informed of the research project and they were asked to notify their tutors if they did not want to have their essays used as data in the study.

### 3.4.1 Collection of written data for analysis

Donna Johnson (1992:87) lists "naturalistic observation" as one of the techniques for data

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collection in the case study and she says that naturalistic classroom writing could be included under this heading. She would define naturalistic classroom writing as "any writing not elicited by the researcher that is part of normal classroom activities". The feedback that I was using as my data would, I believe, fall into this category.

The first stage of the research involved the collection of seventy-five essays[3], which is approximately one-third of the student population in the first year Social Anthropology course (SAN101W). These had been marked by eight different tutors, who were selected from the Monday tutorial groups on a random basis. Four of these tutors were Masters students and four were Honours students; some had had as much as three years tutoring experience, while others were new to tutoring.

The essays were then read and the feedback was studied and analyzed for recurring themes. The methods used in this section of the research will be explained in Chapter 4 Analysis and discussion of feedback data.

### 3.4.2 Interviews with the students

I mentioned earlier that while the positivistic researcher has been seen as an objective observer, the case study researcher, working in the interpretive paradigm, stands in subject to subject relation to her field of study and must negotiate and verify her interpretations of the data with those involved in the study, rather than being free to impose her own interpretations on the data (Walker 1986). If I was to judge how effective the feedback was as a teaching tool, it was important that I understood the ways in which different students were interpreting the tutors' comments. Thus it was essential for me to talk to both the students and the tutors to check whether my interpretations and observations had been valid. Therefore I decided to use interviewing as another strategy for collecting data.

Invitations to be interviewed for the research were sent out to the eighteen students I had

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[3] Three of these essays were photocopied without the final mark or the end comment so could not be used in the research

selected, but only twelve agreed to participate (For invitations see Appendix E). I interviewed a diverse group of students, both male and female, black and white and from privileged and disadvantaged backgrounds; the essay marks of these students ranged from 35% - 65%. The procedure I used would probably be described as a 'focused' interview (Yin 1984:83). The questions were quite open-ended and allowed the interviewer to probe into the context and reasons for the answers. I tried to ensure that the setting for the interviews was informal and relaxed; at the outset I explained the purpose of the interview and assured interviewees that what they said would be treated confidentially. In each interview I followed a set of questions I had drawn up as a schedule. These interviews were recorded on an audio tape recorder and the interview schedule is attached (Appendix F).

Yin (1984:85) notes that as verbal reports, interviews are "subject to the problems of bias, poor recall, and poor or inaccurate articulation." He suggests therefore that interview data should be corroborated with data from other sources. To achieve this end, I designed a questionnaire which I asked interviewees to complete at the end of the interview. They were required to answer four questions, the responses to some of which, served to support data from the interviews. For example, in the interview, students were asked to describe what they thought the tutor had expected to see in the essay. The last question[4] on the questionnaire is:

Please list in order of importance the six most important criteria that you think your tutor was looking for when she marked the essay.

Rank          Criteria

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.

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[4]This question was a slight adaptation of a similar one used by Norton (1990).

Some specific essay comments were discussed during the interview and there were two similar follow up questions on the questionnaire eg

> Select a comment that your tutor has written on your essay and write down in your own words what you think the tutor meant.

The full questionnaire is attached (Appendix G).

### 3.4.3 Interviews with the tutors

During the next stage of the process, I interviewed three of the tutors who had marked the essays of the interviewees. This was done in order to seek clarification and check whether the students and I had arrived at accurate interpretations of the tutor feedback, as well as to gain a better understanding of what the tutors hoped to achieve by means of feedback and what they expected and valued in terms of essay writing. These were long interviews and only one of them was recorded on an audio tape. During the other two interviews I took detailed notes.(For Interview schedule for tutors see Appendix H). The tutors completed the last two questions on the questionnaire. In the analysis, where I have used quotes from tutor interviews or questionnaires, I have given the tutors fictitious names.

By interviewing both the students and the tutors, I was able to draw on multiple sources of evidence and in this way achieve converging lines of inquiry. This has contributed to a clearer understanding of the field of investigation and made the results more convincing and more accurate. Multiple sources of evidence provide multiple measures of the same phenomenon and thus address problems of construct validity (3.4 Data collection).

### 3.4.4 Data base

I have tried to establish a formal retrievable data base for this research so as to increase the reliability of the study (3.4 Data Collection). In order to satisfy the reliability requirements, the researcher should be able to show that the data collection procedures can be repeated and would produce the same results, so there is a need for systematic documentation of the

procedures followed. I have kept a journal throughout the research process where I have recorded, in note form, all the interviews with staff in Social Anthropology, the observation of the feedback tutorial and the essay marking workshop etc. Documents collected in the case study such as the essays and other relevant documents have also been filed and stored so that they are readily retrievable. Analysis of the essay feedback was done in tabular form and has also been stored in an organised system. The interviews have been transcribed and filed and both the tapes and transcriptions form part of the database.

In keeping with the principles of democratic research, a summary of the findings has been presented to the tutors in the form of a report. This was followed by a workshop where students were given the opportunity to examine the results of the study and comment on them; this served to further increase the construct validity of the case (3.4 Data Collection). As Cameron et al (1993:87) point out, results of research should be shared with the researched "in an effort to give them a greater measure of control" over the research process. The workshop will be reported on in more detail in 5.5 Tutor workshop.

### 3.5 Problems encountered in carrying out the study

### 3.5.1 Interviewing

There are a number of problems with interviewing as a research methodology and it is important for the researcher to be aware of these so that she can attempt to avoid bias as much as possible. In the interviewing situation the interviewer is in a powerful position to influence the data that is gathered by imposing her own definition of the situation on the participants. As Kidder and Judd (1986) point out, it is not only the interviewer's attitudes that may influence responses, but the interviewer may have certain expectations of the interviewee which may distort the data. I hoped that by presenting the findings of the research to the participants for discussion and criticism, they would be able to identify bias on my part and correct it.

Another problem that became apparent during the interviewing phase of this project was that the white student interviewees were more open and more critical than the black students. It

is well-known that the respondents' perceptions of the interviewer's characteristics such as race and social status can bias the responses (Kidder and Judd, 1986). I was concerned that black students saw me as a white, staff member in a university which is still perceived as very white, so I decided to employ a black female student as an interviewer and to arrange for some of the interviews to be repeated. The findings from these second interviews are described in the conclusion (6.2.2 Interviewing).

Because we are dealing with the human factor in interviews, the kinds of biases described above, can never be completely overcome. Kidder and Judd (1986) suggest that the way to reduce the effects of bias is to standardize interview procedures by sticking rigidly to the interview schedule. However, some of the richest data emerges from the probing, open-ended questions that may not have been posed on the original interview schedule.

### 3.5.2 The 'halo effect'

There was concern among some of my colleagues that telling the tutors what the goals of my research were could bias the results because the tutors might change their responding behaviour. However, I felt that research should be an attempt to work **for** and **with** the subjects rather than **on** them (Cameron et al 1993) and that it was important that the research was a "shared" project from the beginning. Furthermore, I suspected that the tutors would not have known how to change their responding behaviour, other than to try to be more constructive in their feedback (5.4.2 Positive Reinforcement). Therefore I did not believe that informing the subjects could distort the data significantly ( 5.5 Tutor workshop).

Nevertheless, because these concerns had been expressed, I decided to check for the 'halo effect' by arranging for some students to bring me essays written later in the year and this issue is discussed in 5.4.2 (Positive Reinforcement). Ethical considerations meant that the tutors had to be informed of what I had done and I used the opportunity of the tutor workshop to do this.

### 3.5.3 Subjectivity

The researcher is always in a powerful position to shape meanings and values and case study research is subjective by nature. Because of this, I have made every effort to negotiate my interpretations with participants. Nevertheless, it is inevitable that my own position and experience will influence the research data.

Therefore, I feel it is important that I attempt to deconstruct my position as a researcher and reveal any hidden agendas that I may have had, so that it does not appear that as a researcher I am hiding behind an illusion of neutrality.

Popkewitz (1984) says that the position of the researcher is defined by their affiliation with other groups and interests in society. Therefore my position in the Academic Support Programme at a time when the shift toward Academic Development is taking place means that I will be particularly concerned with educational change and innovation and may be critical of outdated teaching methods. This research project is, in fact, linked to the bigger agenda of Academic Development work. The increase in student numbers and the freezing of teaching posts has meant that more post-graduate tutors are employed to tutor on the first-year courses, and staff in ASP believe that increased emphasis has to be placed on developing training programmes for these tutors.

Furthermore, I am an experienced language teacher and there have been occasions when I have drawn on that experience to make judgments about the tutor feedback in this project. My experience as a language teacher has meant that I have developed certain attitudes and beliefs about the ways in which essay writing should be taught and I have probably also approached the research with certain preconceived ideas and expectations about the ways in which "mainstream" staff handle the teaching of writing. There is always a possibility that these attitudes will influence the data.

In addition, as a white ASP worker who has come from a privileged educational background, I need to be aware that black students would probably identify problems in the feedback that I would not be able to recognise. This is why it was important for me to negotiate with them

and to give them the opportunity to point out their problems.

## 3.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I have explained the reasons I chose to work in the interpretative paradigm and justified them with a brief critique of the positivist model. The case study as a research strategy has been described and I have shown how it seemed to meet the needs of my research project. The case study relies on an informed understanding of the context of the research. Therefore, one section of the chapter is devoted to describing the department in which the research was done against the backdrop of changes that are taking place in the university. Multiple sources of evidence were used in the collection of data for this study and these are described in full. Case study research is complex and seldom free of problems and I have outlined some problem areas that emerged during the research process. These became apparent at the interviewing stage and with regard to the question of transparency in research. The procedures I used to resolve them are dealt with in more detail in the chapters that follow. Because of the powerful role I play as researcher in this project, I felt it was necessary in the last section of the chapter to describe and deconstruct my own position in this research.

# Chapter 4

# Analysis and discussion of feedback data

## 4.1 Introduction

One of the goals of this research project is to gain a clearer understanding of the way in which feedback is used to teach the "culture" of the discipline (1.1 Aims of the Research). In this chapter it is my intention to illustrate how this was done by focusing on the written feedback on a sample of first year essays in the Social Anthropology department at UCT. I was also interested in which feedback was effective and which was not. In order to ensure that I was not making subjective evaluations, I have attempted to support my judgments by drawing on the work of theorists in the field and remarks in the interviews which show how students understood the feedback.

## 4.2 A first step in analysis of the data

In order to analyze the essays and the feedback data I had collected, I decided that the first step should be to find out which aspects of writing the comments focused on. I studied the essays, noting in each case whether argument, structure, content, grammar or style had been commented on, and I completed an analysis table for each tutorial group (Appendix I). The results were added up and were as follows:

Argument    - 37/72 (51%)

Structure    - 43/72 (59%)

Content      - 52/72 (72%)

Grammar     - 56/72 (78%)

Style          - 64/72 (88%)

Although this gave me useful information about what tutors had focused on and provided data in a quantifiable form, I found I needed a framework that was more finely tuned to the particular queries I was raising.

## 4.3 Description of the Ballard and Clanchy scheme

Ballard and Clanchy (1988) set out an effective scheme to analyze what it is that students have to learn in order to achieve cognitive and linguistic competence in the discipline. I found that this could be used as a framework to categorise the comments of tutors.

The first category they identify is the method of analysis in the discipline. They point out:

> The disciplines are marked off from one another less by the uniqueness of the area of reality or experience they set out to investigate than by their distinctive methods of investigation - their distinctive modes of analysis. (1988:14)

Students are considered to be functionally literate in a discipline when they have learnt to use the appropriate mode of analysis competently. In the data I collected there were examples of attempts by tutors to clarify the mode of analysis of the discipline and these will be illustrated in section 4.4.1 Methods of analysis.

Secondly, Ballard and Clanchy identify two dimensions of linguistic competence which students need to acquire if they are to be considered literate in the discipline. As they point out it is almost impossible to really divorce cognitive competence from linguistic competence, because the way of saying things always affects the way of knowing. However, for the purposes of analysis they do try to separate them out. There is one dimension of linguistic competence that they call a "generalised literacy of context" (1988:17) and this includes "correctness, coherence, appropriateness of style and voice and other formal features" (ibid). These are the kinds of problems that tutors are most apt to respond to and examples of this kind of feedback abound (78% of the essays had comments on grammar; 88% on style); therefore, this is the category I would particularly like to focus on in my discussion.

Another aspect of linguistic competence involves what Ballard and Clanchy call, "control of the disciplinary dialect: those meanings, items and forms of language peculiar to the discipline" (ibid). This would include technical terminology, which in first year social anthropology might be exemplified by terms such as "cultural relativism" and "ethnocentricism". In addition, there might be words of common usage, for which students have to reshape their everyday understandings when they come into contact with a new domain of knowledge. An example of this was illustrated by a student who said that a tutor had taught her that she had to unlearn what she had known about words like "tribe", "tradition" and "culture" and learn to use these words in a new way.

Finally, Ballard and Clanchy say that understanding the ideology of the discipline, or "what may or may not be said" (1988:18) helps to establish a student as literate in the discipline. There were only two or three examples of feedback that explained the ideology of the discipline; this is probably understandable because using written feedback to get ideological understandings across is risky and probably most tutors would feel it was too time-consuming. One of these examples is illustrated below:

Another method used is that of participant observation, where one lives in the society and is directly involved in the daily activities of the group. This is the most fruitful method as it provides first hand knowledge, and it is by the use of this method that the real truth of a society's culture and way of life is revealed. A good example was that of the Yanomamö Indians. The anthropologist was able to look at their behaviour, rituals, and general way of life from within the society. 44

*[handwritten margin annotations: "be careful of presenting to positivism: that there is a basic, measurable truth to the human behaviour, and that all the people within a culture act & believe similarly."]*

## 4.4 Analysis of the feedback using the Ballard and Clanchy frame

### 4.4.1 Mode of analysis

The essays which provide the data for this analysis were written in answer to the following question:

ANTHROPOLOGICAL METHODS AND COMMON SENSE PERSPECTIVES
Social scientist often dispute "common sense" views of social issues. use the examples such as those found in the readings below to show how the methods social anthropologists use, and the questions they ask, enable them to reach new interpretations. In each case identify and discuss:
(a) the common interpretation (or view) that was challenged;  (30)
(b) the methods used and/or the questions asked by anthropologists;  (20)
(c) the new interpretations that were reached.  (50)

(A more detailed description of the nature and purpose of this essay question is provided in section 5.2.2.Background)

The question deals with methods of analysis in social anthropology and there were about 27 examples of attempts to clarify the mode of analysis, particularly the methods of research. These were quite intriguing to me as a newcomer to anthropology but I did not feel I could comment in much detail on them.

Anthropology is an interpretive science and not an empirically driven science. Thus, in the example below, the student needs to be reminded that the "challenge" to the common interpretation leads to "new insight" but not "solid fact".

, and it is ultimately the determination of the anthropologist to challenge the ' common interpretation ' that brings about new insight, a new view point and produces solid) fact.
* NB not all that we find as anthropologist = Fact.

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The example below illustrates how, by means of a facilitating question, the tutor encourages the student to be more precise about the mode of analysis used by Social Anthropologists:

---

**INTRODUCTION**

In this essay, the anthropological methods and common sense perspectives will be outlined.  It will deal with the three main issues of Social Anthropology :

*? are they? Do anthropologists mainly challenge old notions?*

(1)    The common view of social issues that was challenged;

(2)    The methods used, or questions asked by anthropologists, and lastly

(3)    The new interpretations that are reached by the use of these methods.

---

### 4.4.2  Literacy of context

The bulk of the comments I studied would fall into the category which Clanchy and Ballard (1988:17) call "a generalised literacy of context". 78% of the essays had comments about grammatical errors, 88% had comments on style and 74% on citation. This is particularly interesting because most of the essays had been marked by tutors and it is my observation that inexperienced tutors focus their comments on grammatical and referencing problems because these are the more obvious errors to detect; they are also easier to respond to. I suspect that one might even find a similar pattern with lecturers.

### 4.4.2.1  Comments on grammar

Feedback which focuses on grammatical errors seems superficial, particularly when the tutor has neglected to comment on difficulties the student may have had in interpreting the basic content of the readings or in structuring a coherent argument. Zamel (1985) has noted that when the content of writing is ignored in favour of minor errors, it is not helpful to student writers (2.2.1 Studies of feedback in process writing). It was surprising to me, as a language

teacher, that in a "content subject" such as Social Anthropology there should be so much emphasis placed on grammatical comments and corrections; I had assumed that content teachers would be more concerned with conceptual understanding.

In the interviews, one student commented that she seldom took note of grammatical corrections in an essay because she was far more interested to know whether her ideas were acceptable. When tutors respond mainly to grammatical problems, students are given a limited notion of composing and they might be led to believe that if they corrected the grammatical errors, the essay would be perfectly acceptable. A surface grammatical error is often an indication of a deeper problem in understanding the concepts and being able to express them in their own words.

In the extract below, the student has had serious problems interpreting the readings and he has found it difficult to paraphrase the ideas so that they make sense.

> In our last Case Study, namely, "Child labour in the Zambezi Valley" (Reynolds, 1991) we found there is a general common interpretation. That General conditions of labour Shortage are at Peak season. (mellor 1985) Presented this view. argue that this labour shortage had led to the Prevention of expansion of cultivated areas. (P. Reynolds: 1991) This view has been challenged by stack. Conversely, argue that shortage of labour is Precisely because of drastic movement of Africa from Net exporter of food toward Net importer of food.
>
> *(tutor margin notes: "what?", "These three sentences don't make any sense. Try re-reading them as you write, & make sure they are fluent & make sense.", "clarity!", "this reference does not appear in your biblio.", "(date)", "oh: wrong before c")*

The tutor has done some crossing out, corrected punctuation and referencing, and commented that the sentences do not make sense. In the passage below I have tried to correct the formal errors as well as I can but the paragraph is still not very much clearer.

*In our last case study, namely, "Child labour in the Zambezi Valley" (Reynolds, 1991)*

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*we found that there is a common interpretation, which is that labour shortages are at peak season (Mellor, 1985). He argued that this labour shortage had prevented the expansion of the cultivated areas (Reynolds, 1991). This view has been challenged by Stack who convincingly argues that the shortage of labour is precisely because of the drastic movement of Africa from a net exporter of food to a net importer of food.*

The problem is rather, that the student has not understood the reading. Firstly, he failed to understand that the "common interpretation" required by the assignment topic was that child labour was not an important factor in the study of food production in Africa. Secondly, the student mistakenly understood the labour shortage as a consequence of the food crisis, instead of its cause.

Students reported in the interviews that they found it difficult to interpret multiple corrections scribbled over their scripts. Scratching out the terms the student has used incorrectly, and superimposing more appropriate ones, often serves no purpose other than to confuse the student. Although the problem has been removed temporarily, this kind of instruction will not help to avoid future problems. In his own study of teacher correction, Hendrickson (1987) found that supplying the correct lexical forms and grammatical structures did not improve students' writing proficiency (2.2.1 Studies of feedback in process writing).

Grammatical errors should not be ignored, of course and there is some evidence that error correction is particularly useful to adult second language learners (Krashen &Seliger, cited in Hendrickson 1987). One tutor explained why he put so much emphasis on grammar:

*...I believe that [grammar] is a fundamental thing that you have got to correct if you are going to be taken seriously in terms of an argument. I think if you can't spell, if you can't punctuate, if you can't have a pause where a pause should be - for effect or whatever, if you can't emphasize what needs to be emphasized, then basic subtle aspects that actually make and enhance an argument are lacking and therefore the argument is suspect.*

Some tutors employed very effective methods to teach grammar and style. Language educators have suggested that any error correction should include selection of a remedy (Allwright, cited

in Hendrickson 1987). The feedback given in the example below should be helpful to the student because the tutor has given a clear explanation of how the problem can be remedied.

> Stack's understanding to^ these concepts was that the black urban people were surviving from poverty by means of, kinship networks. They were sharing according to kinship. They trusted each other; they worked hand in hand. /
> Again you need a little sentence. Possibly you could use sub-heading as well to make the structure more clear.
> G. Murray is discussing household 'strategies' of participation in wage and domestic agriculture. He is trying to substantiate these criticisms

Because of the time constraints that tutors have when marking large numbers of essays, comments in margins are often cryptic and difficult to follow, as the extract below illustrates,

> repetitive style
> holistically? generally? } bad structure
>
> In conclusion, this essay has shown in an overall view how a social anthropologist functions. It has shown that the way of life in certain societies is not right nor wrong, but it is what they believe and what they have been taught. The methods used play a vital role in this and it is this aspect that is possibly the most important, as it creates the opportunity to learn new ideas and ways about other societies of the world.

What is the comment "bad structure" referring to? Is the tutor referring to an error in word order? Does he feel that the adverbial phrase is in the wrong position? If so, what would be a better position? I would also question the comment "repetitive style". The repetition seems to me to be rather effective.

The examples on the following page illustrate how a tutor commented on the same problem twice in an essay. The second comment may be much clearer than the first, particularly if the student did not understand the concept of relevance.

*[margin note: Is this relevant?]*

Poverty, families (both nuclear and extended together with matrifocal, and land are the spheres anthropologists concerntrated on. In another study by C. Murray (1981), land distribution assumptions are identified in Lesotho's rural areas. Murray says there *[is]* general understanding that in Lesotho's rural societies, land is strikingly, equally distributed. and there is a *[?no]* lack of discriminatic

*[margin marks: ✓ and ?]*

He says kin-networks formulate ways and means to help them-selves within the alliance they formed. They ~~po~~ *create* trading or rather battering schemes to help each other. Contrary to the belief in boldness and defiance of the black families, and its negative qualities. (faked) *[margin note: what is this word?]* ~~aut~~ scholars compared and expected the black families to resemble the culture of the white nuclear families of the middle class. The scholars explained a family as only the father+mother and two kids. Unfortunately, it did no suit with the culture of the Blacks who tended to form kin networks and extended families of mutual support.

*[margin note: this does not fit under your heading.]*

## 4.4.2.2 Comments on referencing

The more I studied the essays, the more I realised how many of the comments related to referencing. The comments often seem very superficial, particularly those that refer to mechanical aspects, such as position of commas and fullstops. But responses like these seem to represent just the very tip of the iceberg of a very complex phenomenon which students have to engage with. What was intriguing was to try to uncover and understand the deeper

problems with referencing that might have led to tutor comments such as:

*"Did you say this?"*

*"these ideas are not yours !"*

*"direct quote!"*

*"reference?",*

*"bordering on plagiarism"*

*"no references which means you plagiarised - this is a serious offence!"*

*"this comes dangerously close to plagiarism"*

*"What's the point of just regurgitating what Robertson has said?"*

It is interesting that referencing problems in student texts also seem to evoke the anger of markers and teachers, as illustrated by emotive language, underlinings and exclamation marks and it was the perception of one of the tutors that referencing was a "sore point in most departments".

It is probably appropriate that there are so many comments on referencing because as theorists suggest (2.4.2 Plagiarism) writing is really all about constructing text by building on the ideas and language of others. Students attempt to do this but the whole notion of referencing is new to them and they have not yet learnt the rules. This seems to me to be an area where we as teachers have really failed to make the ground rules explicit. We need not only to tell students when and how to reference, but we need to tell them why we reference and help them understand how these kinds of conventions came to be in order to demystify them.

I have discussed plagiarism in Chapter 2 (2.4.2 Plagiarism) and described it as a new student's attempt to show membership of the discourse community. Bakhtin has contributed to our understanding of the difficulties involved in taking on a new discourse. He says we all acquire many voices and voices carry with them values and points of view. This is why it is difficult to make alien voices our own. In his words:

> One's own discourse and one's own voice, although born of another or dynamically stimulated by another, will sooner or later begin to liberate themselves from the authority of another's discourse. This process is made more complex by the fact that a variety of alien voices enter into the struggle for influence within an individual's

consciousness (Bakhtin 1981:348, quoted in Cazden 1992).

A colleague of mine has been doing interviews with some of our students as part of an ethnographic research project for a Masters degree and I would like to borrow from one of her transcripts as it seems to illustrate quite vividly what Bakhtin has said:

Interviewer: *to come back to something you said, you said something about not being ripe or ready. What do you mean by ripe? When will you be ripe ?*

Student M: *I would be ripe when I can still adhere to academic discourse ... like you're telling me that I have to rewrite my artefact [essay] so that I can have meaning to that person. I know that I still have difficulty of implementing it. So I have to get out of the me that is in me so that I can get into the university of academic discourse itself ... to be free from the decision that I take as an individual not as an academic.*

Interviewer:*Do you see yourself and an academic as different ?*

Student M: *Ja totally different. Because the way I view things I view them differently from what the book says .*
(Thesen 1993)

There is a sense in this dialogue that his language is a part of him, who he is and the decisions he makes; that he has "to get out of the me that is in me" if he is to take on the academic discourse but he is holding back, has a feeling of reluctance.

This reminds us of the very real conflicts that black students face at UCT. They know that in order to succeed they need to acquire the dominant discourse, but they may feel marginalised by it or subordinated. It is the language of the power group in the university, it carries with it those values and as such they do not yet feel comfortable with it.

In the process of acquiring new discourses, is it necessary for us to lose our other voices, the voices from our other "groups" as we acquire the new ones? I sometimes feel that at UCT we induct students from different backgrounds so thoroughly into the academic discourse that they

lose or bury their other voices. And feedback comments like "too colloquial" slapped onto a piece of writing that has a glimmer of "own voice"  may well assist in this  process.

Feedback also sometimes blocks students from tentative experiments with expressing new concepts in their own words. In the example below the student has tried to express the concept of "reciprocity" in her own words and done so quite effectively, and yet she has been accused of inappropriate "word choice and structure".

> Stack became involved in a series of exchanges. If someone asked a favour of her, she will later ask a favour of that person. The children of the people who were close to her, will stay at her place overnight or for a few days and her son will stay at their places too.
>
> *[margin note: watch your word choice & structure]*
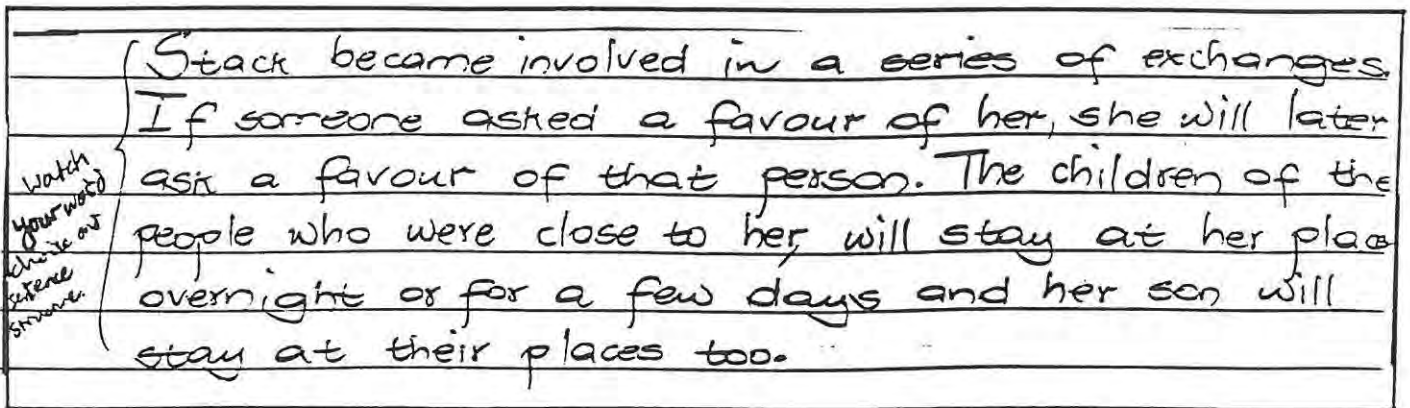
In fact, all that seems problematic in this piece is her tenses. A comment like this may encourage plagiarism because the student probably wishes she had not bothered to grapple with the concept and had just borrowed the author's words. It is certainly a reminder that she is going to have to "learn the language of [her] audience" (Cazden 1992:204) in order to succeed. And it is a reminder to us that if we, as teachers, are really going to deal with linguistic diversity, we will have to give students access to the new discourse and to the rules as this is a way of thinking and speaking and writing that they must acquire if they are to succeed. However, to avoid  a "monologic" approach (Fairclough 1992:51) where students simply replace one language with another, the teacher must raise students' consciousness about the discourse they are learning to enable them to critique it .

Students also need to be aware that the conventions differ from one discipline to another. One student explained in her interview how she learned this the hard way:

Tutor: *Did you do better in your next essay?*

Student T: *No, he [the tutor] said it was because I used too many quotations and it seemed as if I didn't really know what was going on and when I was thinking about it, when*

*I got my Roman Law essay back, my tutor encouraged me to use quotations to substantiate my point, so I used that in my social anthropology essay as well and I just realised that the departmental requirements differ.*

There were examples of feedback that were less cryptic and offered helpful hints to guide an understanding of referencing, as the two examples below illustrate,

Because of Chagnon's. ignorance of local customs and language, many months were wasted in tracing false genealogies. The tribesmen gave these false genealogies because of their taboo on speaking a person's name, especially those of the / deceased. This deception was discovered accidently when the researcher overheard an outsider to the tribe insult a man by calling him by the name of his dead father. By exploiting rivalries and grudges in the tribe, a genealogy gradually began to appear. This devious method exploited enmity and mistrust in extracting information, and served to further strengthen the researcher's place as an outsider in the community. ✓

*you could use direct quotations here to help strengthen your arguments*

*ive use quotes (direct) because the author has said something particularly profound (and or) Succinct. -do not use quis you can better say yourself.*

"Many studies also do not deal with the profound ways that economic and political pressures outside and within the ghetto – the profit motive, the welfare system, the social agencies, the city services – affect cultural patterns, social identify, life chances and inter-personal relations among the poor" (Stack : 1975). *para?* The people that have studied the Black family have most of the time ignored the interpretations that Black people had of their own life experiences. They also defined the "poverty problem" from their own point of view and that of White society (Stack : 1975).

It was interesting that several students (3/12) said that comments on referencing were the most helpful part of the feedback. Quite possibly this might be the first guidance they have been given on referencing as it is just assumed that students will know what it is all about.

Another aspect of referencing and its relationship with voices (2.4.2 <u>Plagiarism</u>) which interests me is that I have noticed that underprepared students are often unable to identify multiple voices in a reading. They get confused about who said what and assign the ideas of one author to someone else that might have been referred to within the article. Sometimes they avoid identifying the voices by writing about "the anthropologist" or "he". The tutors respond to this with feedback like: "Stack does not say this" and "Who is Ashton?"

Recchio (1991:447) has some very illuminating things to say about this in what he calls *"A Bakhtinian reading of a student's essay"*. He says that "the assumptions our students bring to their reading and writing assignments get in the way of their reading and muddy their writing" and this prevents them from developing a critical understanding. He says that when students write, it is as if they are responding in a dialogue which has been initiated by the reading they have done. In order to find their own voices they have to learn to subordinate the other voices, control them and use them as "a voice against which the student can sound her own"(452) and in a contradictory sort of way this means that they have to give the other voices more of a place or more of a 'formal' place in their writing. His suggestion to his students is that they go back and reread and perhaps even write out the words of the author to be clear about what the author is saying so that they can separate their own ideas from the other voices that populate their writing and in this way learn to "manage" the other voices.

I have found that students sometimes understand and relate to a narrative or an illustration in a reading and because it makes a connection for them, this voice will dominate in their writing to the extent that they wander off the topic. Tutors respond with comments such as:

> *"Try to stick to the question and don't waffle!"*
> *"You give too much unnecessary detail and spend too little time discussing the real issues"*
> *"What you have written seems incidental in touching on the topic"*

Recchio's (1991) suggestion seems a useful technique for dealing with this problem. In many of the student scripts I studied, I sensed that the reading of the texts had not been thorough enough or discriminating enough for them to have clearly identified the different authors and what they had said. This may have been because the readings were too difficult for the

students to make sense of them.

I think another way in which students can achieve more clarity and find their own voices is if they use the first person, the "I", in their writing because it can help them to clarify who they are and what they think. An overemphasis on objectivity and impersonal writing is what leads to confused writing. Ivanic and Simpson (1992) say that in reading impersonal academic writing it is sometimes difficult to work out where the writer stands and what she means and writers themselves get confused and lose their meaning if they try to submerge their own identities. Using the first person also helps to make students critical readers because they identify what the other voices are saying and can then counterpose their own ideas.

I noted that students in the Social Anthropology department were being advised not to use the first person. There were feedback comments to this effect eg "Avoid the first person" I checked with the ASP tutor and she said this was a convention required of first-year students in the department. It would be interesting to have further discussions within the department so that questions could be raised around these issues.

## 4.4.3 Control of the disciplinary dialect (terminology)

There were fewer tutor comments on what Ballard and Clanchy (1988:17) call the "disciplinary dialect" (approximately 24 comments). Three or four essays had explanations and clarification of the anthropological concepts "ethnocentricism" and "cultural relativism" and this seems important because these are really central concepts for communicating in Social Anthropology; understanding these terms provides a shared set of preunderstandings which will guide the interpretations the students make of new readings and field work. Tutors used feedback to build conceptual understanding; one tutor clarified that, "ethnocentric is not the same as self-centred", another tutor pointed out that "you may never be able to be completely culturally relativistic", but "...at least you should try to be aware of your ethnocentricism". And yet another tutor questioned whether cultural relativism meant "moral laxity": "Chagnon may have understood why men beat their wives (cultural relativism) but this does not mean he agreed with it." Quite often feedback that explained and clarified word meanings also assisted in building ideological understandings.

The example below is a good illustration of the way in which dealing with intellectually complex concepts can lead to language breakdown (2.1.1 Defining academic literacy). The student is beginning to appropriate the new concept; she has a measure of understanding of it, could probably give a definition for it, but is not quite sure how to use it in a sentence. The tutor has been quite perceptive in noticing this and responding to it.

MANY ANTHROPOLOGISTS FELL AND STILL FALL INTO ETHNOCENTRISM. MANY OF US GREW UP WITH STEREOTYPES AND HAVE SOME PREJUDICES. ANTHROPOLOGISTS FALL VICTIM TO THIS AS SHOWN BY STACK( 1975: 23) :

*You don't fall into ethnocentrism It is an attitude you adopt or possess*

There were many comments that called for a clearer definition of terms, particularly terms that are used in discussion of research methodology eg survey, participant observation etc.

Methods used by Anthropologists Like Lomnitz ( 1977) used a house to-house survey (by) combining anthropological methods of participant observation.

*surveys ps are quite different.*

Students were beginning to learn that some commonly used words might have slightly different meanings in Social Anthropology as is illustrated by this discussion in an interview with a second language student:

> *they [social anthropologists] use other more commonly used words in the other way you know...just like...race...we used to classify race by you can say colour of the person, so we go as far as explaining that the race is not the matter of colour...*

The student seems to be referring to what Bakhtin calls the word's "stylistic aura" or the genre in which the word functions (2.4.2 Plagiarism). Mostly, the tutors commented on these words to clarify, explain and caution students about using them too broadly.

Because it was the December holding, and ussnally !Kung ~~tribes~~ slaughter the ox in
the !Kung are not a tribe

Recently the concept of tribe has been criticised in anthropological circles because it is seen as a colonial category which was imposed on indigenous people. "In southern Africa, the absence of clear cultural or linguistic boundaries and the fluid nature of political groupings have rendered the notion of 'tribe' - conceived as a static, separate cultural-political unit - particularly inappropriate." (Boonzaier and Sharp, 1988:69)

The initial shock and disgust at the appearance of the Indians (to which he openly admits.) was purely
Be careful of concept using the "culture" broadly. due to a lack of understanding of the reasons
, behaviour etc.
behind their culture.

The word 'culture' is changing in meaning and through history it has collected so many meanings that it is a loaded term; the tutor is pointing out that one has to be careful about the way in which it is used. According to Boonzaier and Sharp:

> ...there is not much point in trying to say what culture *is*. This is not a failure of anthropology, or even of science and reason. Indeed to know what can't be known - either to know the limits of a particular science, or to know the limits of knowledge itself - is also *knowledge*. What can be done, however, is to say what culture *does*, and how it does it.(1988:26)

They go on to say that one thing that culture does is to create boundaries of ethnicity and class and race and gender etc. The student has used the term 'culture' incorrectly because

culture doesn't have 'reasons' and as the tutor has pointed out 'behaviour' would have been a more appropriate word to use in this context.

## 4.5 Conclusion

The data has illustrated that feedback can play a valuable role in teaching the discourse of the discipline and tutor comments did fall quite neatly into the four areas outlined by Ballard and Clanchy (1988). I have also tried to show where I felt this feedback had been effective and where it had not. Too much emphasis seems to have been placed on correction of minor grammatical errors at the cost of failing to address students' problems with content and conceptual understanding. In addition, problems students have with referencing do not seems to be adequately addressed by the superficial comments in the feedback.

However, the Ballard and Clanchy framework deals only with  particular kind of comments, viz. those that relate to disciplinary discourse. Therefore it does not cover comments about the actual content of the essay and the way students responded to the task. Neither does it provide for comments about the organisation of the essay and the development of argument. These areas will be included in the next section where I will look more closely at the transcripts of the student interviews in order to respond to the other research questions (1.1 Aims of the research).

# Chapter 5

# Analysis and discussion of interview data and report on tutor workshop

5.1    introduction

5.2    students' understanding of the task

5.3    tutors and the task

5.4    feedback

5.4.1  students' understanding of the tutor comments

5.4.2  positive reinforcement

5.4.3  feedback on second language student essays

5.4.4  data from questionnaires

5.5    tutor workshop

5.6    conclusion

## 5.1 Introduction

A central objective of this research has been to ascertain whether there was effective communication taking place between tutors and students in the feedback process, and therefore I wanted to find out how students understood and interpreted the feedback on their essays. If teachers spend so much time correcting and writing comments on student essays, it seems important that there should be adequate communication taking place. I was also interested to know whether the feedback catered to the needs of second language students (1.1 Aims of the Research). As outlined in Chapter 3 (3.4.2 Interviews with students), twelve students were interviewed and filled in questionnaires and this was followed by interviews with three tutors. The discussion that follows will draw on data from those interviews and questionnaires.

## 5.2 Students' understanding of the task

### 5.2.1 Rationale for focusing on task

In the process of analysing the essays, I realised that there was another prior question which had impacted on the kind of feedback that was given: Had students understood the task? If the broad question underlying this research is to discover what the teaching processes are that support essay writing in the disciplines, then it becomes more and more apparent that in this process, task and feedback are very closely linked. If the task has not been understood a lot of the feedback will be devoted to clarifying these misunderstandings. Markers' comments help to show us where the gaps are in student understanding. Parkinson and Mattson (1992) suggest in their study that one way in which markers' comments can be made more useful is by feeding the information gained from a study of them back into the curriculum (2.2.3 Relevant South African Research).

### 5.2.2 Background

I arranged a meeting with the ASP tutor in the department to discuss the essay because she had been part of the team that had designed the essay title. I felt that it was important for me to speak to those responsible for drawing up the task to find out how *they* expected it to be answered. The essay title is repeated below to clarify the discussion that follows,

ANTHROPOLOGICAL METHODS AND COMMON-SENSE PERSPECTIVES

Social scientists often dispute "common sense" views of social issues. Use the examples such as those found in the readings below to show how the methods social anthropologists use, and the questions they ask, enable them to reach new interpretations. In each case identify and discuss:

(a) the common interpretation (or view) that was challenged;(30)

(b) the methods used and/or the questions asked by anthropologists; (20)

(c) the new interpretations that were reached. (50)

The ASP tutor explained that students were required to read at least three of the eight

readings. Then, if they wished they could deal with each reading as a case study. However, they should explain in the introduction how they planned to structure the essay and they should draw together the comparisons between the readings in the conclusion. She had communicated these suggestions to the students in her tutorial. It seemed that some lecturers and tutors had given students some guidelines about what was expected in the essay and an opportunity to ask questions and others had not.

### 5.2.3 Difficulties with the task

I realised that the task had not been well understood and I estimated that in approximately 50% of the essays, the students had not had a clear idea of what was required of them. In 29/72 essays the tutors had made comments to this effect eg

*"You do not seem to have grasped the essay question"*

*"You've not dealt with the task set for you"*

*"It was not clear in your argument whether you understood the question that was being asked of you in the essay topic."*

There is also the risk that if students have not understood what it was that the task required, they may not understand markers' comments relating to the task either.

Some students dealt with each reading separately and there was no attempt to integrate the readings or make general statements about the way anthropologists work. Many students simply summarised three readings, rather than identifying the "common sense" views and showing how anthropological methods enabled the researchers to reach new interpretations. This led to tutor comments such as this one:

*"Not only is this semi-legible and very poorly written, but you have not even tried to address the tasks set for you. Instead you have semi-summarised the readings (by copying out odd bits of them) and chosen to summarise the wrong bits."*

Plagiarism has already been discussed quite extensively (2.4.2 Plagiarism and 4.4.2.2 Referencing), but this quote seems to imply that there may be another reason for it. Perhaps,

when students fail to understand the purpose of the writing, they resort to plagiarism because in this way they can mimic the discourse and string together technical phrases that may convince the reader that they know what they are writing about.

The interviews confirmed that many students had not understood the task. It seems that even in those tutorials where they were given some preparation, they were not taught a careful analytical approach to unpacking the task. Some interview transcripts illustrate the kinds of problems they had:

Interviewer: *Before you wrote this essay, did you feel you really knew what was expected of you ?*

Student K: *I had no idea - I was asking everybody in my lectures and classes if they understood what the question was, and they weren't very helpful - I don't think anybody really knew ...that I spoke to, that is.*

Another student explained her difficulty with the task more explicitly:

Student T: *It's very difficult to answer the question set because it's not a whole essay question, like one essay question and then you go from there. It's divided into sections and it's difficult to combine the entire essay into different sections....its difficult to form an answer when you have all these questions to answer because you tend to concentrate on answering the questions [rather than answering the question as a whole]*

Only three of the students interviewed said they thought they had understood the task and these were students who scored low marks on the essay (35%, 38% and 52% respectively). Jordan, (cited in Murray 1990:17) observing classes at the University of Manchester, gives a helpful explanation for this anomaly. He found that "students at the lower end of the writing scale grossly over-estimated their language ability especially in writing".

### 5.2.4 Second language students (L2 students)

Second language students particularly, seemed to have difficulty analysing the essay title and understanding what was required of them. The readings also presented problems for these

students, and in some of the essays I found it difficult to identify whether it was the readings or the task that had presented a problem. The tendency to summarise could have been a result of students not understanding the readings sufficiently well so as to identify what the common views were and what new conclusions the anthropologists had come to as a result of their research. Student L voiced this problem very clearly in his interview:

*... I didn't really understand the readings because I didn't take out what was needed from the readings, I just took the whole material and put it in the essay*

## 5.3 Tutors and the task

The tutors I interviewed were very aware of the difficulty the students had had with the task and one tutor commented that the essay title had been problematic for first-year students because the question encouraged a disjointed answer:

*...the major problem with these essays was that ... to have quite a cogent discussion - starting with an introduction and ending with a conclusion - was practically impossible ...*

There was also evidence that some of the tutors had not been clear about the requirements of the task. One student commented that when they were given the essay title, her tutor had said that they were not expected to integrate the three readings.

Looking at the comments alongside the marks gave me a clear indication that clarity about the task had been a problem for at least two of the tutors. In some cases the mark allocation seemed inconsistent. Students who had misunderstood the question or who had failed to integrate the readings, were awarded high marks. Marks given to approximately 1/8 (9/72) of the essays of second language students seemed far too low - 20%, 32%, 35%. For the first time these kinds of problems with tutors' marking were revealed to lecturers too, because the random marking system meant that in their tutorials, lecturers saw essays marked by new tutors. Perhaps new tutors need to be drawn into the discussion, if not the design, of the essay title.

## 5.4 Feedback

In the interviews both students and tutors confirmed that students were not given opportunities to redraft and revise their essays and indicated that in a large class of first-year students this would be very difficult to organise. One tutor said students could rewrite the essay if they wished, but the mark would not be changed. Some tutors set aside time to discuss the essays with the students but this seemed to be a fairly formal activity and it took place after the essays had been marked and handed back to the students. Neither students nor tutors saw writing as a process of learning and making meaning, they said it was an opportunity to show that you had learnt and understood the readings. Thus the writing of essays was seen as product-oriented and as an assessment activity (2.3.2 The teaching of writing in the mainstream). Both the tutors and the students said that the purpose of feedback comments was to indicate to the student how she could improve on subsequent essays. The students had completed the second essay by the time I interviewed them and I asked whether they had been able to apply some of the advice given in comments from the first essay. One student pointed out that the second essay had made such different demands that there had not been much that they could transfer to the second essay.

### 5.4.1 Students' understanding of the tutors' comments

In reading the essays and the comments, I realised that there was potential for a breakdown in communication. Many of the comments would fit Zamel's description of feedback as "vague and abstract" (Zamel, 1985:89). These comments were usually end comments which which were not content-specific. They often seemed to be rather standard phrases, which did not respond to individual problems. Examples of these would be:

*"Your work lacks argument and structure",*

*"Argue the question more closely and structure your essay more systematically"*

*"keep working at making everything precise and relevant"*

*"You do not develop your argument"* etc.

Responses such as these do not provide students with clear and explicit strategies for revising the text and they are too vague for the student to know what it is the tutor values. I found

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these kinds of comments in approximately half the essays which I analyzed. In the interviews the students told me that they had read the comments on their essays, but I found that they did not always have a clear sense of what was meant by the comment or how they could use the advice.

In Student N's essay he had failed to identify the "common sense views" or the "new interpretations" the anthropologists gave. There were very few tutor comments on the essay apart from the following rather vague end comment:

*"don't leave the argument hanging in the air"*

The student and I had quite a lengthy discussion about what the comment could have meant. At first he said:, *"That means that … I am writing too long sentences,so … I must write short factual sentences. "* Another idea he had was that the tutor would have liked him to give more examples and illustrations. I felt she was probably commenting on the fact that he had not really answered the question, but it was such a vague comment we were unable to come to any conclusion and unfortunately the tutor was not available to come for an interview.

Another student's comments are interesting as she puzzles over the end comment.

Student C: *…she said "Argue the question more closely" …It is sort of hard to…it would help if they put "for example…" Maybe she was actually saying to me "you must read the readings more closely".*
Interviewer: *Is that what you understand by 'argue the question more closely' ?*
Student C: *Well, now that I speak to you about it, I suppose it could have been - I think that's a very vague thing -saying 'argue the question more closely'…*

When I asked the students what they thought they could do to improve their essays, I found that they were simply repeating the end comment eg *"I would have to structure the essay more systematically….."*etc. When I probed further I found that students did not understand concepts like "argument" and "structure". If the student does not have a clear understanding of what an academic argument is or has not understood the concept of needing to provide a coherent structure for her essay, this kind of end comment will not be helpful because it refers

to abstract rules and principles which the student does not understand.

Some of the student responses indicated that they thought that when this word "argument" was used, it meant that they should "take sides". The response from student K is a fairly typical example. The tutor's end comment was "There is no argument in your essay."

Interviewer: *So, if you had to define 'argument', what would you say it was?*
Student K: ...*my own point of view towards the topic, my own argument against their argument and justify it.*

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) suggest that the metaphors we use every day "structure how we perceive, how we think, and what we do" and Peggy Nightingale (1988) takes this idea one step further to suggest that the idea of argument that many students bring to tertiary education is the idea of "argument as war" which is the way so much of our every day metaphorical language conceptualises it, eg He shot my proposal down in flames etc. Lakoff and Johnson point out that a more precise metaphor for academic argument might be "argument as a journey" or "argument as a building".

Students very seldom have the concept of academic argument explained to them; it is just assumed that they will know it. One of the tutors I interviewed confirmed this; she said that she thought very few students really understood what was meant by academic argument and she felt that the only reason she understood the concept, was because she had had it explained to her in her Politics I class. Moll and Slonimsky (1989) discussing their BEd class at the University of the Witwatersrand noted that:

> Our ASP students do not perceive academic discourse to be a form of argument and tend not to know how to construct an academic argument.(Moll and Slonimsky 1989:161)

On the basis of these interviews I would argue that this last statement is true of most students at undergraduate level and not exclusively the ASP students. It seems that we as teachers use a discourse to talk about writing that we assume students know, but in fact students bring their own understandings of the nature of academic discourse and these get in the way and colour their understandings of tutor comments on essays.

I think it is important to stress that communication breakdown in the feedback process seemed to be a universal problem amongst the students I interviewed. It was not as if there was only a specific group who had difficulty understanding tutor comments eg students who had scored badly in the essay; it seemed to be a problem for all.

## 5.4.2 Positive reinforcement

In Chapter 2 (2.2.2 Research that has informed my study), I mentioned that much of the research on feedback has indicated that the quality of feedback is important. Hounsell (1987) for instance pointed out that feedback has a washback effect; students who repeatedly get negative feedback on their essays regard essay writing as a chore and put little effort into it.

Both Hounsell and Cohen and Cavalcanti (1990) found the feedback they looked at to be quite negative and critical. However, the feedback I examined seemed largely positive. 41/72 (56%) of the essays had some encouraging comment and gave some positive reinforcement. I have used quantitative data at various points in this analysis and I think it is important to mention that this kind of data is deceptive in that it always looks very accurate and complete. However this obscures the fact that it might have been difficult in some cases for the researcher to arrive at decisions in order to quantify the data. For instance, I found it difficult to decide whether some comments were constructive or not. A comment like, *"Not bad, [Student L], You seem to understand the material but a number of problems arise, particularly from the structure of your essay..."* seems both positive and negative. In my analysis, comments that were ambiguous, were not regarded as positive reinforcement.
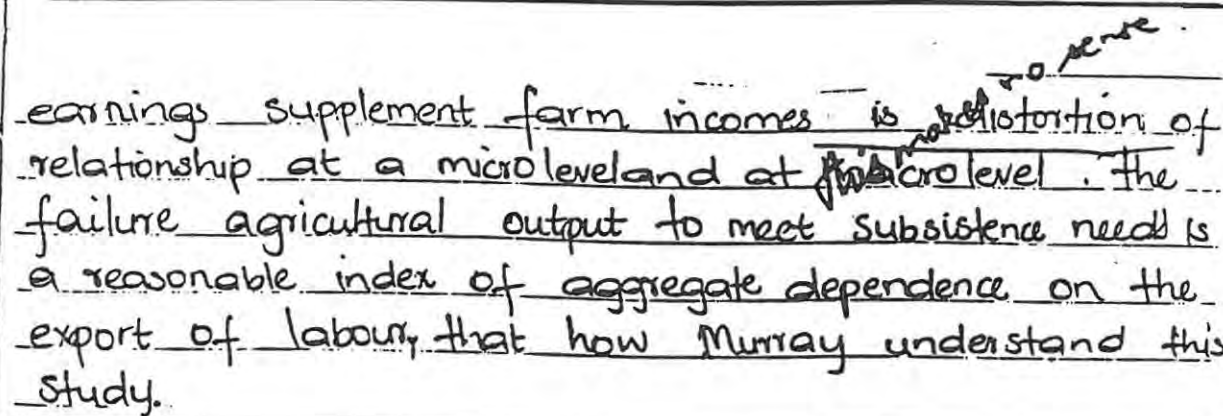
It must be remembered that the tutors did know that their essay feedback was going to be studied as part of a language research project and this may have had an effect on this aspect of the data (3.5.2 The halo effect). Over the remainder of the year I looked at about half a dozen essays at different times but I have not been able to identify much difference in the quality of the feedback. The tutors had not been warned beforehand that I would be looking at these later essays and were only told what I had done after the event.

Two tutors remarked in the interviews that it was very important for the tutor's comments to be encouraging to the student. They suggested that at the same time as offering criticism,

the marker should offer ideas of how things could have been done better. One tutor said he found, as a student himself, that there was nothing more disheartening than to have only negative comments from a marker. The other tutor said if there is no encouragement, students just wonder whether "it is all worth their while".

### 5.3.3 Feedback on second language student essays

A further aim of this study was to understand whether feedback catered to the learning needs of second language students (5.1 Introduction). It became apparent in studying the essays and the feedback that tutors had had particular difficulty understanding and interpreting a dozen of the weakest second language essays. Many of these essays were peppered with comments such as, "What?", "What do you mean?" and "This makes no sense" as the extract below illustrates:



Sometimes it seemed that obvious gaps in the understanding of the content and problems with conceptual understanding had not been picked up because no comment was made. Where a student's language is not proficient, the tutor may not be experienced and skilled enough to interpret what the student is saying. Or it may be that the tutor is unable to identify the conceptual problem and offer a solution to it. Tutors commented on a few surface problems and avoided the more complex issues. Commenting on referencing and grammar is an easier solution than trying to deal with misunderstandings in the content or suggesting ways of restructuring an essay for better coherence. One tutor reflected this problem in his interview, "... content - that's something that is very very difficult to feed back."

I interviewed three tutors and these interviews gave me valuable insight into the "world" of tutoring through which I gained a better understanding of the problems tutors face. Two of the tutors were first language speakers of English, were obviously bright stars in the Social Anthropology department Honours course and were relatively inexperienced at tutoring. I would like to focus on extracts from interviews with the third tutor because he spoke in a very honest way about his difficulties in dealing with the essays of second language students,

*...what I tend to do is cover the front page, so I don't see a person's name, because that often, like it or not, can colour your marking obviously...And it's a very sad issue and I think it's quite true that a lot of people come down very hard on black students because of communication problems, vocabulary problems, basic linguistic skills that might be lacking. And that often, just the name can determine a lot in relation to the result...And as much as I sort of feel, well you know, one isn't racist or one has no racist overtones or influences coming in, I think its a very real factor that does influence one. Because the reality of it is that students who struggle with language are black students generally. I mean obviously there are also others who have problems, but you can't blame them [DET students], its the nature of the DET school and what else they have been through.*

This tutor goes on to share some other perceptions and expresses concern about the inadequate training of tutors and tutors' feelings of marginalisation. Although these issues go beyond the scope of this research, I will quote him at length because I believe that these are quite commonly held views and it is only by being aware of them and understanding them that we will be able to address them in tutor development programmes.

Tutor: *I'm really not at all sure how to tackle this immense problem. It's basically a problem that stems from schooling ...Simply, English proficiency is not adequate for university in a lot of cases and ... a lot of people... in first year Social Anthropology shouldn't be there. It's as simple as that. And it's also largely the admission policy. So there are issues on a very broad level that need to be considered, as to who is being accepted at university and why. Are these people actually capable enough, and if they aren't, then the university has to get them capable enough, hence ASP to a certain extent, but I think that it requires more than ASP. It requires perhaps a year of preparation that looks at things like fostering a higher degree of proficiency in English language and writing skills,*

*comprehension skills, how to argue, basic technicalities and linguistic things..."*

Interviewer: *In a sense I hear you say that you don't see it as the tutor's problem.*

Tutor: *Put it this way, I think we are dumped with a remarkably complex problem that I think we can do very little about. I don't believe we have much power to change and affect what's happening...Obviously we try, or I try to do as much as I can...*

Interviewer: *You are not really trained or qualified?*

Tutor: *No not at all - not at all trained to deal with someone who is battling to an extreme degree with communicating on basic terms with me, let alone complex Anthropological arguments. It's extremely difficult for me to deal with that and again there are also pragmatic aspects - I don't have the time to talk to every student who has a language problem...*

The same student touches later on the changed culture of learning in our universities where in tutorials students are faced with what Hartman (1992) has termed "the mismatch in cultural and cognitive mental spaces" between students and tutors. Of course, this tutor may not be reflecting the feelings of all tutors but, at the moment, and perhaps for years to come, many of the tutors will be drawn from relatively privileged backgrounds and they feel they are worlds apart from the students they teach.

*I think there is a huge problem with communication between tutors and students. I don't know if its the perception of a tiered system and power relations and if we are seen as relatively inaccessible, but I certainly feel that we are to some extent out of touch with what's happening on campus...regarding first year students and the problems they experience - I really don't believe that tutors, although they obviously run into problems when they mark, are aware of the scale and the extent of the problem and perhaps how to address them. And then I don't think students are aware of where the tutors are coming from. Its a two way thing and I think there is a bit of a gap there. Obviously the idea is that tutoring and marking should break down that gap to some extent and I don't think it allows itself the room to do that - the system as it stands at the moment.*

(Shaun)

One gets a sense from studying this transcript of the way that apartheid education has disadvantaged white students; it has blocked their understanding of the experiences of their

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fellow students from diverse backgrounds and led to these cultural gaps and a sense of "us and them". In her paper, Hartman (1992) suggests that tutors need a language of thinking, "a meta-cognitive awareness" in order to understand and deal with these problems of mismatch. She says that new tutors understand concepts as givens that have to be transmitted and these understandings need to be shifted so that in their training, the tutors become aware of knowledge as socially constructed. This will lead to the realisation that the tutorial group should draw on the cultural capital of its group members as they construct meaning together. In this process tutors become learners alongside their students and they forge common terms of understanding. I think this awareness needs to extend to a greater understanding of language as transmitter of values and power. Tutors need an awareness of the multilingual context of their tutorial group and an understanding of the black L2 learners as competent language learners who are often able to converse fluently in three or four languages. In this way cultural and linguistic diversity will be perceived as a resource of competence rather than as a problem.

If through a growing meta-cognitive awareness, tutors recognise that understandings have to be mediated, they may make more effort to do this in their essay marking. For instance, instead of scribbling "this makes no sense", the tutor might be able to nudge the student toward making his purpose clearer by probing and questioning. The tutor may realise that essay writing consultation offers benefits for both students and tutors. Talking to the student will help the tutor unravel what may have seemed like an unreadable student text and by negotiation and mediation tutors will be able to guide their students to express their meaning more clearly. They may also find that they come to what might be called a "meta-social awareness" as they get to know their students better and to understand their complex backgrounds and to realise what a rich contribution they can make to building knowledge and understanding in a multilingual tutorial group.

In section 5.5 Tutor workshop which follows I will discuss the feedback workshop I held with the Social Anthropology tutors. The views expressed during that workshop and in the tutors' evaluations after the workshop, only served to confirm what these interviews revealed.

### 5.4.4 Data from the questionnaires

The data from the questionnaires did not yield as much information as I had expected it

would. I think this was because I had hoped to draw conclusions from a comparison of the student responses and those of the tutors. However, the sample (twelve students and three tutors) was too small for such purposes.

The questionnaires did however serve the intended purpose of corroborating the data collected in the oral interview. For example, in the interview, students were asked which tutor comments had not been helpful and many students, particularly black students (6.2.2 Interviews) told me that there were no comments that were not helpful. In question 2 in the questionnaire this was worded slightly differently:

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> Where you feel you really don't know what he/she [the tutor] meant, write down the comment that you don't understand and try to explain why you don't understand it.

All the students responded to this question and identified a comment that they had not understood. Therefore, in this case, the questionnaires were more successful than the interviews in eliciting the information that I wanted about comments that were inexplicit. Perhaps the reason that I had poor responses to the interview question was that it was not open-ended enough.

The data from question 3 (Appendix G) could not be used because many students and some tutors had not read the instructions very carefully and they ticked a number of answers, instead of just the one that the instructions had indicated. There was possibly a flaw in the way the question was worded. It should have been more emphatic in indicating that only ONE box was to be ticked.

Question 4:   Please list in order of importance the six most important criteria that you think your tutor was looking for when he/she marked the essay.

served to corroborate the data from the oral interview, because in the interviews students had been asked to describe what they thought the tutor expected to see in the essay. (Appendix G and 3.4.2 Interviews with the students)

This question perhaps produced the most interesting results. What was interesting was that it

appeared that both students and tutors *were* aware of the criteria that are used to mark essays and there was some agreement (see Appendix) between tutors and students about what the criteria should be. I did speculate about whether the students and sometimes even the tutors, really knew the meaning of some of the stock phrases which they used, in answering this question:

*"a systematic approach"*
*"logic and coherence of your argument"*
*"structure of an essay"*
*"academic writing skills"*

It is quite possible that the students were simply repeating phrases from the handbook or from the comments on their essays. This raised some concerns for me about the validity of using this kind of data to draw conclusions.

As previously indicated, the size of the sample was too small to be able to make any kind of definitive statement. For instance, when 2/3 tutors said that grammar and spelling were important criteria and only 3/12 students agreed, this did not provide sufficient evidence to claim that tutors placed more emphasis on grammar and spelling than students did.

### 5.4 Tutor workshop

I was asked by the Social Anthropology Department to report the findings of my study to the tutors and I chose to do this by means of a written description of the main research findings (Appendix J) and a workshop. The aims of the workshop are outlined below:

* to give tutors the opportunity to comment on the research process both, in discussions in the workshop and in the evaluation questionnaires, completed after the workshop. This was seen as a way of corroborating essential facts and evidence discussed in the case report in order to increase the construct validity of the study (Yin 1984).

* to train tutors to give more effective feedback. This was done by encouraging them to engage with the problems identified in the data and to consider ways around

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communication breakdown.

The workshop was very short (just one hour) but this was the time allocated by the Social Anthropology Department. It has been noted as a weakness in the tutor evaluations and there are plans for a three hour workshop to be run in 1994.

Because of the time constraints, I decided to focus on three important issues that had emerged in the research. These were:

*    The role that feedback plays in conveying the conventions of the discourse. This was illustrated by examples on overhead projector slides. (see examples in 4.4.1)

*    The way in which communication breaks down between tutor and student at the feedback stage. This takes place most commonly when students misunderstand abstract comments that are not text specific and which occur at the end of the essay.(5.4.1 Students understanding of the comments) (Appendix K)

*    Extensive commenting on grammar and style and a failure to comment on content and conceptual problems. (4.4.2.1 Students understanding of the comments) (Appendix L)

One or two tutors made comments on the research process during the workshop. For example there was a suggestion that if the study was repeated, more students should be interviewed .

Other comments were made in the evaluations (Appendix M) and I would like to quote a few of the more interesting comments, because I think they give a sense of how valuable this workshop was for the tutors.

Question: *Did you think this was a useful workshop?*

Tutor: *Yes, what I found most useful and important was the way in which the gap that exists (in terms of language and discourse) between tutors and many first year students was revealed - just the sheer immensity of it at times. I think tutor often take their understandings for granted.*                                   (Shaun)

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Question: *How do you think the workshop could be improved?*

Tutor: *The perennial problem - too much to do and not enough time to do it. We needed 2 hours to really get to grips with some of the NB issues that were raised - the discussions were cut short just as we were grappling with issues.* (John)

Question: *What were your feelings when you heard about this research project and were told that a researcher would be studying the essays you had marked?*

Tutor: *Initially I think I reacted negatively - kind of protecting my interests ie "What does she know...its all very well theorising but when you are dealing with one pathetic essay after another, its absolutely soul destroying..." . But I am extremely positive now.* (Shaun)

Tutor: *I felt that the research was important in that we need to evaluate and develop marking as part of our tutorial/teaching programme. At the same time I felt reluctant about participating.* (Mary)

Question: *Have your attitudes changed?*

Tutor: *Yes absolutely. I think this work is invaluable and has a central place. I sincerely hope that it will have an affect on policy and practice.* (Shaun)

Tutor: *...it represented some of the feelings I had as an undergraduate. It is good to see these being brought to light in the department.* (James)

Generally the tutors seemed to feel that they had learnt a lot from the workshop and there is strong support for similar workshops in the future. While interacting with the tutors in the workshop, I confirmed what I had suspected at the outset of the research project (3.5.2 The halo effect). I realised that informing the tutors about my research project initially, could not have influenced my data very significantly at all, because tutors simply had not had the knowledge and understanding to alter their responding behaviour.

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## 5.5 Conclusion

The chapter has focused primarily on students' understanding of tutor comments. It was found that end comments that were not text specific and referred to abstract principles, were not well understood by the students. There was evidence that students' understanding of the task impacted on the feedback and the way in which it was understood. Concern has been expressed about inadequate tutor responses to the weakest second language student essays. This led to a consideration of the difficulties that poorly trained graduate tutors face in dealing with the complex writing problems of underprepared second language students. The final section of the chapter reviews a tutor development workshop that was designed based on the findings of my research project.

# Chapter 6

# Conclusion

6.1    introduction

6.2    criticisms of the research project

6.2.1  the need for a research partner

6.2.2  interviewing

6.3    findings and questions

## 6.1 Introduction

In this final chapter I intend to critically evaluate the research project and to put forward suggestions for future research projects. The findings have been summarised at the end of Chapters 4 and 5 and the insights and conclusions drawn from these findings may point to new directions for research into student writing and tutor training.

## 6.2 Criticisms of the research project

My aim was to conduct a small scale research project which looked at feedback in a multi-faceted way and I have tried to provide a comprehensive response to all the questions asked; in those terms I believe the aims have been met quite adequately. The project suffered from the problem common to all case studies in that the researcher was also the observer and in a position to make subjective evaluations. I tried to offset this problem by interviewing the students and the tutors to ensure that my judgments were validated by them. It was important for me to be aware of my subjectivity and to try to be as honest as possible.

There were areas where improvements could have been made in terms of the design and implementation and some of these have already been referred to in the analysis (5.4.4 Data

from questionnaires). The others will be discussed below.

## 6.2.1 The need for a research partner

In retrospect I realise that this research project would have been enriched if I had had a Social Anthropologist as a research partner. In the first stage of the analysis (Chapter 4) a researcher with this kind of background would have added another dimension to the critique of the feedback. As a language teacher, I focused on the linguistic aspects of the discourse of the discipline, as I did not feel adequately equipped to evaluate aspects such as the method of analysis and the ideology. As the project evolved I found that I was having to draw more and more on the assistance of the ASP tutor in Social Anthropology and my understandings of the discipline have certainly grown. However, the prospect of a language specialist and a "content" teacher collaborating in this kind of research seems to offer a number of advantages.

## 6.2.2 Interviewing

I have referred previously (3.5.1 Interviewing) to the problem I perceived with some of the interviews. I felt that the black students had not been as open and as critical as some of the white students and I was concerned that it might have been because of the way in which they perceived me as a white interviewer and also a staff member. As a result I decided to employ a mature black student as an interviewer and I gave her a brief training session and arranged for her to repeat the interviews with three of the students. She used much the same interview schedule as I had used but discussed a different essay with the students. Unfortunately, I found that the transcripts and notes from her interviews were less informative than the data from my own interviews.

There may be a number of reasons for this. The students may have been inhibited about having the interviews repeated, although I had warned them that this was a possibility. Secondly, the interviewer was inexperienced and she did not probe and question and adhered very strictly to the interview schedule. This taught me that training interviewers is a very complex process and it led me to conclude that it is perhaps only the researcher who really knows what information she wants.

Labov's (1969) research may also give some pointers to understanding some of the complexities related to interviewing. He found the same monosyllabic behaviour was exhibited by a black child, Leon, whether he was interviewed by a white interviewer or a black one. His theory was that it was the social situation which was the most powerful determinant of the child's verbal behaviour. The social situation may have been the key to the problem in my research as well. The students were being interviewed in the ASP office of a traditionally white institution where black students still feel very marginalised. Therefore, they were liable to be inhibited no matter who the interviewer was. I feel that one solution to this problem might be to conduct group interviews, where students are interviewed along with their friends and might feel more relaxed.

## 6.3 Findings and questions

The findings show that there is a need to shift tutors away from what Dr Stephen North has called "English teacher reading" (quoted in Hingle 1988:65) where tutors read essays superficially, looking for the grammatical errors, to a deeper level where tutors try to understand what the student is struggling to say. It is important that tutors communicate to the writers what it is that is valued in their discipline. The rules of academic writing and, more specifically the rules of the discipline need to be made explicit to the students so that they can become competent writers in the discipline. I have suggested that research and co-operation between language teachers and discipline specialists is needed so that we can learn more about the cultural understandings and ground rules of the disciplines.

I have argued that a breakdown in communication occurs between tutor and student because tutor and student do not share a common language in talking about academic discourse. In order for this sharing to develop there is a need for more communication and a different kind of communication, both in the process of essay writing and in tutorials. Problems understanding the feedback also seem to arise if students have not had adequate understanding of the task requirements. This raises important issues about the way in which the task is designed and unpacked for the students; further research is needed in this area.

I am aware that many of the suggestions for improving communication in feedback such as introducing a process approach with more consultation at the draft stage of writing are not

feasible for departments with large numbers of students. However, student writers need responses to their writing that they can understand and react to and therefore we need to explore feasible ways to achieve this.

The response to the tutor training workshop (5.5 Tutor workshop) indicated that this is an avenue that needs to be developed because it led to change in attitude and tutors seemed to show enthusiasm for gaining a better understanding of language and writing. It is important to raise tutors' awareness of  writing as a process of drafting and redrafting so that they recognise the importance of revision and feedback at the early stages of the process and convey this to their students.

Tutors could give students opportunities to use written language to help clarify their understanding of the subject in small writing assignments that do not get assessed. Perhaps then, tutors and students will begin to see writing as a tool to enhance learning, rather than as a mirror for reflecting learning.

An ideal situation would be if graduate tutors were relieved of the responsibility of evaluating the essays. Then in their tutorials they would be able to collaborate in the process of the essay writing, responding to the essays and making suggestions for ways to improve them, without having the additional burden of marking and evaluating, for which they are not adequately trained.

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# Appendix A

SAN101W INDIVIDUAL STUDENT RECORD 1993

SURNAME, INITIAL ............................. TUT GROUP.....

| CRITERIA | ESSAY1 | ESSAY2 | ESSAY3 | ESSAY4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **CONTENT** | | | | |
| grasp of issues | | | | |
| coverage of topic | | | | |
| **STRUCTURE** | | | | |
| development of argument | | | | |
| **EXPRESSION** | | | | |
| language usage | | | | |
| grammar/spelling | | | | |
| appropriate use of concepts | | | | |
| **PRESENTATION** | | | | |
| absence of plagiarism | | | | |
| referencing in text | | | | |
| legibility | | | | |
| MARK | | | | |
| Marker (Initials) | | | | |

Other written work:

| D/A | P1 | P2 | P3 | P4 | CT1 | CT2 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ____ language | ____ | ____ | ____ | ____ | ____ | ____ |
| ____ argument | | | | | | |
| ____ summary | | | | | | |

SCALE: 1=very poor  2=poor  3=average  4=good  5=very good

**Appendix B: essay marking criteria**

**STAFF ASSISTANCE:** Help may be obtained from your tutor, the person currently lecturing, or from anyone else on the staff. We are almost always happy to see students and assist with any problems that might occur.

## WRITING ESSAYS

Essays are a very important component of the work required in each course. The essay topics and due dates are detailed in your course outline. You are STRONGLY ADVISED TO BEGIN READING WELL BEFORE THE DUE DATE. Apart from reducing pressure on library books, this will enable you to absorb the reading, to compare and evaluate the authors you have read and to formulate your own analysis before the actual writing. This prepatory period is crucial in essay writing.

## FORMAT

1. Essays should, if possible, be typed or printed, on A4 size paper. Pages should be numbered.
2. Refer to course outlines for required essay lengths.
3. A margin at least 2,5 cm wide is required on the left-hand side of each page for purposes of annotation, and only one side of each page should be used.
4. To facilitate sorting and checking by the Department, the front page of each essay must give the following information.

----------

COURSE (SAN101W, SAN215F, SAN314F etc.)

NAME OF TUTOR
DATE on which essay is due
TUTORIAL GROUP NUMBER

STUDENT'S NAME
DATE on which essay is submitted

ESSAY TITLE
(This must be precisely as given)

----------

## STUDENT GUIDE TO ESSAY REQUIREMENTS

*What are the main criteria for essays?*

In an essay you are expected to show full and accurate knowledge of the material that is relevant to a particular topic. The topic is usually approached in the form of a problem that is set by the particualr essay question. In response to this problem you develop an argument which is built up step by step, using different points to support it. These points are based on the available evidence (facts) and the ideas and interpretations suggested by other writers. You must indicate where you found these ideas and evidence, and this is done in two ways. A list of references is used at the end of the essay to list the readings you have consulted, and references are used throughout the essay to show where specific ideas, quotations and bits of evidence come from. You must also make sure that what you write can be clearly understood by the reader who marks your essay.

The main criteria for essays can be summarised as follows:

**CONTENT -** the information relevant to the topic, and how it is analysed and argued

**STRUCTURE -** how this information and argument is planned and organised

**EXPRESSION -** the manner in which the essay is written

**PRESENTATION -** the reference list, references and other technical requirements.

Note: Use the following checklist <u>each time you write an essay.</u>

*Have I met these criteria in preparing and writing my essay?*

**CONTENT**

1. Have I answered the specific question?

2. Is my argument clear to the reader?

3. Have I covered all the main issues?

4. Does the information I have used support my argument and do I give sources?

5. Have I done enough reading for this essay to allow me to deal adequately with the topic?

   - Is this reflected in my essay?
   - Have I been able to combine the information from different readings in my essay?

6. Have I been able to include my own analysis of the information as well as ideas of other writers?

7. Is my essay the length it is supposed to be?

**STRUCTURE**

1. Does my introduction give the reader a clear indication of the main issues that my essay will discuss?

2. Have I developed and explained my argument clearly?

   - Are my paragraphs containing the main points in a logical sequence (order)?
   - Do my paragraphs link up with each other so that my argument has a logical development?
   - Does all the information in a particular paragraph relate to a single main point?
   - Are all points supported by reasons, evidence and examples?
   - Is there a logical flow from sentence to sentence within each paragraph?

3. Does my conclusion offer an effective summary of my main argument?

**EXPRESSION**

1. Is the language I have used clear and accurate enough for my reader to understand what I mean?

2. Have I used concise sentences which are not so long that sense is lost?

3. Have I avoided using the personal

4. Is my essay free of slang and jargon?

5. Is it clear that I understand important terms or concepts used in my essay?

6. Have I avoided using <u>as my own</u> the WORDS and IDEAS of other writers i.e. plagiarism?

   - PLAGIARISM means that another writer's words and/or opinions have been used <u>without being acknowledged</u>. This occurs when someone else's work has been copied word for word, or in a slightly altered form, and there are no quotation marks or references to show that these <u>words</u> have been borrowed. Plagiarism also occurs when the <u>ideas</u> of another writer have been used but this has not been indicated with references. It is regarded as a **VERY SERIOUS OFFENCE.**

**PRESENTATION** (see, too, the next section on REFERENCING)

1. Have I used references correctly to show where I got my information and ideas from?

2. Have I set out my list of references correctly?

3. Have I checked through my essay to get rid of careless mistakes?

4. Is my handwriting neat enough to read?

5. Have I attached a cover page with all the necessary details?

**REFERENCING**

References mean those works cited in your essay. It is very important to use references in essays since they show your sources for factual data and give them some validity. Secondly, references are important since they make it clear when you are advancing arguments distinct from those of your sources. For example:

*Stack (19:44) claims that studies of blacks in North America fail to account for the variety of domestic strategies in urban black communities. She claims that, "Many descriptions of black American domestic life by both Blacks and Whites (Frazier, 1939; Drake and Layton, 1945; Abrahams, 1963; Moynihan, 1965; Rainwater, 1966) have overlooked the interdependence and cooperation of kinsmen in black communities".*

The Department of Anthropology uses the following style of referencing. The name of the writer, the year of publication and the page number of the reference is given in the text. This usually appears in brackets, although the writer's name may appear as part of the text, in which case only the year of publication and page number appears in brackets.

In general, you should cite references in the following three cases:

1. When quoting directly from another author (i.e. when using their exact words). For example:

2. where you do refer to the author inside
   brackets:

*Access to land, and not legal ownership of
land, is deemed to be of primary
importance (Sahlins, 1972:12).*

In both these instances you have informed
the reader who the author is, which of
his/her books you are referring to (by
giving the date - if there is more than
one book in that year, number them 1972a
and 1972b, etc.), and the specific part of
the book (colon implies page number).

## REFERENCE LIST

Since you have not given titles of books
in the body of your essay, it still
remains for you to do so in your reference
list. Here you must list all the works to
which you have referred.

For example:

## REFERENCES

Ellen, R. F. (ed.). 1984. Ethnographic
research: a guide to general conduct.
London, Academic Press.

van Velsen, J. 1969. The extended case
method and situational analysis. In
A.L. Epstein, (ed.), The Craft of
Social Anthropology. London, Tavis-
tock.

Hunter, M. 1961. Reaction to Conquest.
London, Oxford University Press.

As can be seen, your list of references
must contain all the following information
about each reference:

1. Author's name
2. Year in which the edition used was
   first published
3. The full title of the book (or article)
4. Place of publication
5. Name of publisher

If you are using an article in an edited
collection, give the name of the editor(s)
and the title of the book in which it
appears.

van Velsen, J. 1969. The extended case
method and situational analysis. In A.L.
Epstein, (ed.), The Craft of Social
Anthropology. London, Tavistock.

A journal article is listed as follows:

Goody, J. 1963. Feudalism in Africa?
Journal of African History 4, 1: 1-18.

Note: Staff members in the department
would be happy to help, but suggest you
look at Palmer, R. and Chalmers, G., 1988.
Flying Start: the key to successful study
which is in the Library's Short Loan
Collection, for useful advice.

# Appendix C: Title of the essay

ANTHROPOLOGICAL METHODS AND COMMON-SENSE PERSPECTIVES

Social scientists often dispute "common sense" views of
social issues. Use the examples such as those found in the
readings below to show how the methods social
anthropologists use, and the questions they ask, enable
them
to reach new interpretations. In each case identify and
discuss:

(a) the common interpretation (or view) that was
challenged;(30)

(b) the methods used and/or the questions asked by
anthropologists; (20)

(c) the new interpretations that were reached. (50)


The ASP tutor explained that students were required to read at
least three of the eight readings. Then, if they wished they
could deal with each reading as a case study. However, they
should explain in the introduction how they planned to
structure the essay  and they should draw together the
comparisons between the readings in the conclusion. She had
communicated these suggestions to the students in her tutorial.

# DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY

## TUTOR TRAINING WORKSHOP: ESSAY MARKING

29 March 1993 : 15h00 - 16h30

venue : A215

## Preparation

Read 3 samples of student essays, and evaluate each in terms of
its content and argument, structure and expression.
Assign each a mark and write a comment explaining why you awarded
this particular mark.

## Workshop

1.      DISCUSSION IN GROUPS   (*30 minutes*)

On the basis of the marks and comments given for each essay:

   * identify the general mark categories represented by the
     sample essays (eg fail, 3rd, lower 2nd, upper 2nd, 1st)
   * discuss why each sample essay should fall into a
     particular mark category, and not into a higher or
     lower one
   * list the criteria which distinguish each particular mark
     category discussed by the group - including those mark
     categories from which any answers were excluded
   * note any serious discrepancies in the marks awarded by
     the various markers, and suggest reasons for this

2.      PLENARY DISCUSSION   (*40 minutes*)

On the basis of the findings of each group:

   * summarise the criteria which characterise the different
     mark categories discussed by the groups
   * compare these criteria with those suggested in the
     guide to essay marking (History Dept. 1992)
   * evaluate this guide and modify its proposals where
     necessary
   * discuss the validity of distinguishing between degrees
     of excellence and failure
   * discuss the validity of a more consistent standard of
     marking, and how it may be achieved

3.      TUTOR BRIEFING ON ESSAY MARKING   (*20 minutes*)

   * what is required in essay 1
   * student record sheets
   * tips on essay feedback

# Appendix E: Invitations

## UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN

26 April 1993

Dear

### LANGUAGE RESEARCH PROJECT
### THE ROLE OF FEEDBACK IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF ESSAY WRITING SKILLS

This project is being conducted in the Social Anthropology Department at UCT and the aim is to understand the role played by feedback (ie.tutor's comments in the margins and at the end of essays) in developing essay writing skills. At the second stage of the project a number of first year students will be interviewed in order to describe the ways in which they interpret and react to the feedback on essays.

You are invited to take part in this second stage of the project and if you agree you will be required to come to an interview which will last between 20 and 30 minutes. You will be paid R15 per interview.

If you would like to take part in this project, please fill in the form attached to this letter and write down the times when you are usually free. Once the form has been filled in, please place the form in the envelope provided and then hand it in at the secretary's office in the Social Anthropology Department. You will be contacted shortly for your interview.

Yours sincerely

MORAGH PAXTON
Language Research and Development Officer

# Appendix F

CASE STUDIES OF TUTORS' RESPONSES TO STUDENT WRITING

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR STUDENTS


Did you read the comment the tutor wrote at the end of this essay?

Did you read any of the comments in the margins and within the essay?

Why do you think tutors make these comments when they mark essays? What is the purpose?

What have you learnt from the feedback on this essay?

Can you find an example of a comment that you like and which you find helpful?

Why do you think it is helpful and how do you think you would use it?

Which comments are not helpful? Why?

Did you feel that you really knew what was expected of you for this essay ? Can you describe what you think the tutor expected to see?

Does the tutor comment / your mark show that you did understand what was expected? Explain

What do you think your tutor regards as a good essay?

How do you think essay writing contributes to your learning at university?

Explain what you understand by the following words/remarks eg argument, structure, etc.

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR STUDENTS

1. Reread the comments that the tutor has written on your essay, select one and write down in your own words what you think the comment means.

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-----------------------------------------------------------
-----------------------------------------------------------
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2. Where you feel you really don't know what he/she meant, write down the comment that you don't understand and try to explain why you don't understand it.

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3. Did you see that the purpose of your essay was :
(Place a tick in the box next to the answer that you feel is appropriate)

To summarise the available literature                          []

To summarise the available literature and add your own
comments, criticisms and associations                          []

To organise your essay around one or more central
unifying themes                                                []

To use the literature as a springboard to trigger your
own comments, ideas or responses to the topic in general []

To manipulate ideas in order to present a persuasive
argument                                                       []

Other (please specify)                                         []

Please list in order of importance the six most important criteria that you think your tutor was looking for when he/she marked the essay.

Rank                              Criteria

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.

# Appendix H

Written comments on student essays take a lot of time and effort. Why do you write these comments ?

What do you see as the purpose of this kind of feedback?

What skills do you expect your students to have in order to write an acceptable essay in Social anthropology?

Do you ever give a student who has written a very poor essay the opportunity to rewrite?

Whose responsibility is it to teach students how to write university essays?

Where did you learn about essay marking ?

Do you feel you are adequately prepared and competent to assess first year essays? do you feel its an unfair demand to have placed, upon you?

Do you comment on grammar and style?  Why ?

Do you see yourself as an evaluator / judge or as a facilitator when you comment on essays

Further questions would be designed to check that students' interpretations of feedback were accurate

Appendix 1: Sample Analysis table

TUTORIAL GROUP L
TUTOR'S NAME

| | COMMENTS ON ARGUMENT | COMMENTS ON STRUCTURE | COMMENTS ON CONTENT | COMMENTS ON GRAMMAR | COMMENTS ON STYLE | COMMENTS ON REFERENC-ING | POSITIVE COMMENT |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| STUDENT L | ✓ | — | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| STUDENT K | — | — | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | — | |
| STUDENT M | | — | | ✓ | ✓ | — | |
| STUDENT N | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| STUDENT T | | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| STUDENT W | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| STUDENT C | — | — | ✓ | ✓ | — | ✓ | |
| STUDENT B | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| TOTAL FOR GROUP E | 3 | 5 | 5 | 8 | 7 | 8 | 4. |

REPORT ON THE LANGUAGE RESEARCH PROJECT
IN SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY

A CASE STUDY OF TUTORS'RESPONSES
TO STUDENT WRITING

Moragh Paxton
July 1993

REPORT ON THE LANGUAGE RESEARCH PROJECT IN SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY
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## Introduction

This report is a very brief summary of some of the findings of
the language research project in Social Anthropology to give some
background for the tutor workshop to be held on Monday 16 August.
The research project is not yet completed, as some follow-up
interviews are still to be held. However, the researcher felt
that it was important  at this stage to come back to the tutors
to make the research visible to them and present  some of the
findings of the study for discussion. It was felt that the
research could be enriched by their ideas.

The goal of this research project was to understand what is
effective feedback and what is not,  in the teaching of essay
writing and academic literacy in the university. As a way of
examining this issue, markers' comments on seventy students
essays in the first year Social Anthropology course were studied
and analysed for patterns and themes  and a group of students and
some tutors were interviewed.

## Rationale

It is important that university students, particularly those in
the humanities, master the skill of academic writing because it
is through written work, mainly in the form of essays, that they
are assessed. It is often assumed that students who get into
university should be able to write because they should have been
taught to do so at school, however, what is seldom acknowledged
in this argument is that academic literacy is a very specialised
skill.  Students  have  to  learn  what  constitutes  legitimate
knowledge in the discipline and they need to learn to use the
language of the discipline correctly. However, feedback on essays
is often one of the only ways in which students are given advice
about the rules and converntions of the discipline.

## Findings

1. Perhaps the most important issue that was begun to emerge from
this research is that communication seems to break down  between
tutors  and  students because students do not have a grasp of the
nature  of  academic  discourse  underlying  what  is  being
communicated to them and, therefore, comments on essays are
misinterpreted. Comments that are written at the end of essays
about what constitutes academic discourse are often not at all
clear to students who are unfamiliar with the canons of academic
discourse. Examples of these  would be rather characteristic
essay comments, such as "Your work lacks argument and structure",
"...keep working at making everything precise and relevant",
"Argue the question more closely and structure your essay more

systematically", "Integrate the readings" etc. If the student has not understood the concept of needing to provide a conclusive argument or coherent structure this kind of end comment will not be helpful because it refers to abstract rules and principles which the student does not understand. Responses such as these do not provide students with **clear and explicit** strategies for revising the text. Clanchy and Ballard (1988) liken it to a 'secret code' that has to be cracked before students understand how language and thinking should proceed in the discipline.

When I asked the students I interviewed what they thought they could do to improve their essays, I found that they were simply repeating the end comment on the essay eg. "I would have to structure the essay more systematically..." etc. And when I probed further I found that many students did not really understand what "argument" or "structure" meant. Even if students could define argument, would they be able to apply it to their writing?

Peggy Nightingale (1988) says that the idea of argument that many students bring to tertiary education is the idea of 'argument as war' which is the way so much of our metaphorical language conceptualises it eg. winning and losing arguments, attacking and defending positions etc. Whereas, as Lakoff and Johnson (1980) point out, a more precise metaphor for academic argument might be 'argument as a journey' or 'argument as a building'. One of the tutors I interviewed said that she thought that very few students really understood what was meant by academic argument. She felt that the only reason she understood the concept as well as she did, was because they had had it explained to them in her Politics I class. Very few students have the concept of academic argument explained to them the way Clanchy and Ballard explain it,

> The term argument is used in a special sense in relation to academic essays. It does not mean that you must necessarily 'take sides' or present only one point of view. Rather it means that you explore the topic through a clear and consistent development of ideas, using adequate evidence. (Clanchy and Ballard quoted in Nightingale, 1988:65)

In the essay that was studied for this research project, students were required merely to synthesise the readings around three central themes ie. the common interpretation that was challenged, the methods used and questions asked by anthropologists and the new interpretations that were reached. And yet, when I asked students why tutors had indicated that they were having problems with argument, many of their responses indicated that they thought that when this word argument was used it meant that they should 'take sides'. The response below from one of the students is a fairly typical example.

"I needed to present my own point of view towards the topic, my own argument against their argument and justify it."

This sort of evidence seems to lend support to Peggy Nightingale's theory.

Some students write well because, in a sense, they have penetrated the tacit beliefs academics hold about academic discourse, but in a multicultural learning environment we cannot assume that all the students share the same values as the teachers and we cannot make assumptions about the background knowledge that students bring. The 'rules' which may have been implicit to traditional white students may need to be made more explicit to students from different backgrounds (Craig, 1989). I noticed that second language students I: interviewed, had particular difficulties understanding the concept of "structure" and other common expressions used in responding to student essays eg. "relevance", "colloquial", "integrate", "assumption"

Comments need to be more precise if they are to help students, they should respond to a specific problem at the point where it occurs in the essay and should suggest ways of dealing with it. Direct questions in the body of the essay, as in the example below, facilitate the learning process as they challenge students and make them think. There were a number of examples of this technique in the feedback; the extract below illustrates the way a question teaches the student in a facilitating way, to be more precise about the mode of analysis used by Anthropologists.

---

INTRODUCTION

In this essay, the anthropological methods and common sense perspectives will be outlined. It will deal with the three main issues of Social Anthropology :

*?. are they? Do anthropologjets mainly challenge old notims?*

(1)    The common view of social issues that was challenged;

(2)    The methods used, or questions asked by anthropologists, and lastly

(3)    The new interpretations that are reached by the use of these methods.

---

2. Comments often seemed to deal with surface problems in the essays, and neglect more serious problems, for example a lot of attention was focussed on referencing and grammar which seems superficial when a student has had serious problems interpreting the basic content of the readings or in structuring a coherent argument. 74% of the essays had comments on referencing and a lot of these focussed on mechanical aspects of referencing. More fundamental questions of when to quote and when not to, and clarification of what is considered to be plagiarism and why, seem to be the important aspects of referencing but they are seldom dealt with in an explicit way.

It was surprising that in a content subject such as Social Anthropology there should be so much emphasis placed on grammar and style. An overwhelming proportion of the essays (83%) had grammatical comments and corrections. In the interviews, one student commented that she seldom took note of grammatical

corrections in an essay because she was far more interested to know whether her **ideas** were acceptable.

Responding mainly to grammatical errors gives students a limited notion of composing, and leads them to believe that if they correct the grammatical errors the essay will be perfectly acceptable. Surface level errors are often an indication of a deeper problem in understanding the concepts and being able to express them in their own words. You could eliminate surface level errors from students writing and still leave other vital aspects of the literacy problem untouched.

This does not mean ofcourse that grammatical errors should be ignored. Some tutors employed very effective methods to teach grammar and style. One such example is illustrated below.

Stack's understanding of these concepts was that the black urban people were surviving from poverty by means of kinship networks. They were sharing according to kinship. They trusted each other, they worked hand in hand /

- Again - you need a link sentence. Possibly you could use sub. headings as well to make the structure more clear.
E. Murray is discussing household strategies of participation in wage and domestic agriculture. He is trying to substantiate these criticisms

A comment that explains clearly how the problem can be corrected is more helpful than simply scratching out terms the student has used incorrectly and superimposing more appropriate ones. This type of correction often serves no purpose other than to confuse the student and although the problem has been got rid of temporarily, this kind of instruction will not help to avoid future problems. Students told me they found it difficult to interpret multiple corrections scribbled over their scripts.

3. Another problem that the research has highlighted is the difficulties tutors have in understanding and interpreting the essays of second language students. Many of the weaker essays were peppered with comments such as, "What?", "What do you mean?" and "This makes no sense." Comments such as these are not helpful to the students. Would the feedback not be more effective as a teaching device if the tutor attempted to summarise what he/she thought the student was trying to express and asked the student if that was what he meant?

Sometimes it seemed that obvious gaps in the understanding of the content had not been picked up because no comment was made. 34% of the essays had no comment at all on the content of the essay.

Dealing with the writing problems of second language students presents real problems for tutors who have no training in this area. If at all possible, it would be important for the tutor and the student to meet and discuss an essay with major problems, so that meaning can be negotiated. Often the student may understand the concept but he/she has difficulty expressing it.

Conclusion

It is not possible in such a brief report to deal with all the issues, nor is it feasible in an exploratory study such as this to offer a set of solutions to the problems, but a few ideas seem to be emerging which may be useful in improving writing instruction in the form of essay feedback. Tutors need to communicate to the writers what it is that is valued in writing in their discipline and make the rules of academic writing and, more specifically, the writing of the discipline, explicit, so that students can become competent writers in the discipline. Academic literacy is something far bigger and broader than simply grammar and spelling.

It is important that tutors help students to see that writing is a process of drafting and redrafting and to recognise the importance of revision and feedback at the early stages of the process. Students should be encouraged to get feedback on their drafts from an interested and competent reader. If tutors, because of heavy commitments are not able to do this, there are other alternatives. Students could be advised to work with a peer or to go to the Writing Centre which is being established in the Robert Leslie Building.

Finally, I would like to thank the staff and students of the Social Anthropology department for giving me permission to carry out this research project and for the help and support they have given me. In particular, I would like to thank Ceri Oliver Evans and Desiree Fray for all the time and assistance they have given me and Dr Spiegel for allowing me time during his lectures to make announcements.

## References

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# Appendix K

1. Students found <u>end</u> comments such as the following ones difficult to understand and difficult to respond to. Do you have suggestions for ways in which you could make the instruction clearer?

*Argue the question more closely and structure your essay more systematically*

*Link your paragraphs more clearly*

*You could develop your argument more*

*keep working at making everything precise and relevant*

2. The extract below is from a very weak essay, the student had not understood the readings and he was not clear about what was expected of him in the essay. He was given a mark of 35% and very little comment other than this end comment:

*You seemed to leave much of the argument "hanging in the air" ie. you don't follow through.*

Sometimes in a case like this, it is a good idea to simply focus comments on <u>one section</u> of the essay (one reading) because too many comments are bewildering to students. What content-specific suggestions do you have for this student on the extract below?

*In the shantytown of Mexico, the author Lomnitz tried to challenge the cultural poverty. For him to know the situation of that particular town he decided to be with the families of that particular area. What he noticed at last was that these carpet layers of Mexico were the immigrants. They were not from Mexico but because they were having families in the Mexican city they decided to search for work there.*

*The interpretation Lomnitz reached was that for people to survive they must work "hand in hand" so as to strengthen the kinship.*

# Appendix L

Below is an example of a student text where all the surface errors have been corrected and yet fundamental problems in understanding the content and answering the essay question have not been addressed. Read the corrected version which follows and decide how you would respond to the more global problems of understanding.

Common views and their methods of interpretation of different authors.

Reynolds (1991) is addressing common views in her article of (1991) "Dance of Civet Cat". Its main theme is the Labour in Africa and the role of children. Labour is negotiated within families in relation to the control of children's labour, that how (Reynolds. 1991) states it who

According to Reynolds (1991) food crisis was caused by a shortage of labour at peak seasonal periods, and she also says that "serious labour contraints and low labour productivity lie behind this (Round up, 1991 pg). Most of labour of which Reynold is concerned, is done by women and children. Work of Children stand out as being of great importance. In this article According to Reynolds (1991) people believe that children should start farm work at their early ages, that could build them for the future and it is a good lesson to them, to have responsibility. _____ / _____ references

Child labour is mostly important to women because most of the work should be done by them. If the children are working, they are helping out their mothers. ✓

Methods used by the anthropologist to investigate the children labour is by involving himself to the people

# Appendix M

EVALUATION OF TUTOR WORKSHOP ON ESSAY FEEDBACK
16 August,1993.

1.Did you think this was a useful workshop ? Yes/No

Why/Why not?

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2.How do you think the workshop could be improved ?

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3.What did you feel that you had learnt from the workshop ?

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3.What were your feelings when you heard about this research
project and were told that a researcher would be studying
the essays you had marked ?

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4. Have your attitudes changed?

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5. I am keen to continue this research by looking at an
essay written later in the academic year (ie.  essay#3 or
essay#4 )? I feel it would give me a fuller picture of both
first year essay writing and tutor feedback. How do you feel
about this ?