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Measuring the Outcomes of Individualised Writing Instruction: A Multilayered Approach to Capturing Changes in Students' Texts

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Abstract

In a highly competitive higher education environment where resources are limited, educators are increasingly concerned with providing evidence for the effectiveness of teaching interventions, including one-to-one writing support. This article offers a model for analysing the changes in student writing as a result of individualised writing instruction. The multilayered approach to textual analysis proposed here concentrates on five aspects of academic writing that students need to master during the first year of tertiary level education. The model is illustrated with reference to a first year student's assignment. The application of the model allows for a systematic description of changes students make to their draft assignments, and the evaluation of whether these changes were consonant with the topics discussed during tutorials. The rationale for measuring student revisions is both to inform teaching and tutorial practice, and to provide valuable information for senior managers seeking to identify effective ways of enhancing students' academic literacies.

Keywords: individualised writing tutorials, revisions, first year students, feedback

Student Writing in Higher Education

The quality of students' writing in higher education concerns both academics and others interested in the sector. Although employers value literacy highly and the closely related area of communication skills, these are among the areas in which the gap between employers' expectations and their satisfaction with graduates' abilities is greatest (Archer & Davison 2008). Academics, too, regularly despair at the writing capabilities of their students (e.g., Dann 2009; Lamb 2009). Yet writing is central to the learning experience of university, and it is a crucial means of assessment. Students who do not master disciplinary practices are unlikely to succeed on their course or potentially in their professional practice after graduation. For these reasons and others, universities have a responsibility to support the development of students' academic literacies. This can be approached in different ways, including embedded disciplinary support or generic study skills teaching. Either approach can be provided by central units or by subject academics as part of the degree. This article focuses on

supplemental writing support offered by a writing centre, which is centrally funded but, being based on one-to-one tuition, seeks to reflect disciplinary cultures and practices.

Teaching one-to-one is a costly approach, and, in the current financial climate, it is crucial to evidence the benefits of this provision for managers and other stakeholders. This article contributes to debate about the effectiveness of one-to-one writing tuition by presenting a multilayered model of analysis of student writing that incorporates high-level analysis with close text inspection. Unlike much of the research into writing support, this model seeks to measure the impact of this intervention rather than measure student perceptions of effectiveness or level of satisfaction. The model is illustrated with reference to a first year undergraduate student's assignment, which was collected as part of a larger data set. This data consisted of draft assignments students brought along to tutorials, the notes made by tutors during tutorials, and the revised assignments students produced after tutorials. For the purposes of this article, we have selected the work of a single student. Collected during and after her tutorial, her data were analysed to determine the outcomes of one-to-one writing tuition. This article does not offer an evaluation of the pedagogic value of one-to-one writing support; rather, it offers a model by which the support can be evaluated at a local level. The data therefore is intended to illustrate the working of the model, rather than to establish value in this context. A full evaluation of the effect of one-to-one support and of the usefulness of the model is currently in progress.

Individualised Feedback for Student Writers

Students entering university must write at a new level and often in different ways from those in which they previously engaged. Whilst some students make the

transition to academic writing at university relatively easily, others struggle. As has been known for a long time, one-to-one tutorial support helps students make the transition to university writing more effectively than classroom teaching (Bloom 1984; Graesser et al. 1995; Leibowitz et al. 1997). However, As Thompson (2006, 40) writes, ‘only a few writing centers appear to have taken up the challenge to develop measures of student learning.’ Yet institutions rightly want to know whether individualised support makes a difference in the performance of students. Specifically, managers want to know whether this support improves students’ writing in ways that advance institutional goals such as supporting wider participation and retention.

By taking up the challenge to examine the impact of individualised writing tutorials, this article seeks to contribute to the assessment of one-to-one writing development. Previous researchers (e.g., Leibowitz et al. 1997; Bell 2000; Thonus 2002) have tried to measure change in students’ writing following supportive interventions and have looked at students’ perceptions of improvement as a result of writing tutorials. For example, Leibowitz et al. supplemented students’ responses about the tuition they received with evaluative data from other participants in the writing support process. User perceptions, especially when repeated over time (e.g. Bell 2000), can throw light on the value students place on the tutorial process, but may not show actual change.

However, measuring changes in students’ writing as opposed to gathering data on student perceptions of change or satisfaction with support is difficult. In part, this is because student writing may have many different types of problems with different levels of importance so an analytic framework must address change at different levels of importance. For instance, surface level errors such as sentence boundaries or

punctuation may have high salience but relatively low importance compared with answering the question, structure and organisation of ideas. Relatively few studies have looked at the impact of writing centre support on improvements in student writing (Thonus 2002; Williams 2004). This article seeks to go beyond existing surveys of student users to offer a framework for describing the changes students make as they revise assignments following one-to-one tutorials. The researchers posed the following three questions in their study of writing tutorials:

- Can the changes students make after one-to-one writing tutorials be systematically described?
- What types of changes do students make to their draft assignments following tutorials?
- Are the changes students make in line with the topics discussed during tutorials?

This article presents a developed affirmative answer to the first of these questions by presenting a model for the systematic description of changes in student drafts. It contextualises the study of tutorials, outlines the data collection methods, and offers analysis of this data. The article concludes with some implications for policy and practice and by suggesting ways that this model could be used to improve one-to-one writing tuition at university.

The Context of the Study

Support for students' academic writing at Coventry University is provided by the Centre for Academic Writing (CAW), which is a centrally funded unit. One-to-one tutorials delivered by experienced tutors allow students to get immediately relevant advice about any assignment on which they are working. Students can bring draft assignments at any stage of the composition process, so tutorials may range from helping students understand their assignment briefs to offering feedback on nearly

complete drafts. Tutorials last 55 minutes, and, in addition to discussion, students may re-write passages of their drafts. After each tutorial, writing tutors complete a brief summary of their discussion and note any action points so an internal record can be kept. For the purposes of this study, tutors were given an additional 30 minutes to reflect and record the focus of tutorials.

The tutors at CAW are writing specialists with a range of experience and disciplinary specialisms, including teaching literature, English as a foreign language, and linguistics, and some tutors have had careers in journalism, business, and creative writing. The tutors' pedagogic approach is to promote students' autonomy and confidence as scholars. The aim is to help student writers to revise their own assignments and develop their authorial voices rather than tutors doing editorial work for them; in this way, 'the goal of each tutoring session is learning, not a perfect paper' (Brooks, 1991: 2). This involves, for example, offering feedback on the response to an assignment question or brief, the use of supporting evidence, and adherence to academic genres.

Tutors do not use the model of analysis presented in this article in tutorials. Although the model is based on principles of good tutorial practice, for example, addressing higher level issues such as organisation before commenting on grammar or vocabulary, the model is intended to be used for research purposes and depends on concepts and terms that students may not find accessible.

The Methodology of the Study

The researchers identified the parameters for participation in their study of tutorials and then collected data from students and tutorials that fit these criteria. First year students were selected as participants to narrow the focus and to look at the texts of students whose work might be available if the study were extended longitudinally. As

the aim of the study was to compare initial drafts with revised versions, the researchers only included students who brought at least a portion of their completed assignment to the tutorial. Photocopies were made of students' drafts showing the annotations made by students and tutors during tutorials. In some cases, students also supplied electronic copies of their draft assignments, while in other cases, photocopies were scanned and optically recognised. Participating students also agreed to provide copies of their submitted assignments (revised following tutorials). The revised assignments were all supplied in electronic form.

In addition to these drafts and revised assignments, data was generated to capture what occurred during the writing tutorials. Tutors made detailed notes about the issues or questions raised by students, the issues they identified, the points discussed during the tutorial, and the actions that the student planned to take as a result of the teaching intervention. This was an important part of the research because it helped the researchers explore trained writing tutors' knowledge, consider how to use this to improve tutorials, and contribute to staff development.

The Analytical Framework

The starting point for our methodology was Kelly and Bazerman's (2003) descriptive study of student writing in geological science. Other studies that take a multi-method approach to understanding student writing were used to develop the analytic framework (e.g., Bell 2002; Christie & Dreyfus 2007; Haswell 1988, 2000; Prosser & Webb 1994; Storch & Tapper 2009). An analytic approach grounded in systemic-functional linguistics was chosen (SFL; e.g., Halliday & Matthiessen 2004; Martin & Rose 2003), although the researchers also called upon the insights of corpus linguistics and traditional (structural) grammar. As mentioned earlier, the analysis

looked systematically at higher order issues before addressing areas such as academic register and grammar.

The constraints of a single article permit the detailed analysis of only one sample assignment although the researchers have examined 26 sets of data. The sample selected is representative of other examples, though it is shorter than most. Because of this, the tutor was able to address issues at each level of analysis. The discussion that follows is informed by the wider data set that was collected. The sample assignment consisted of a 500 word formative task set in the first year for the Social Work undergraduate degree programme that a student brought to a one-to-one tutorial, and which she revised based on this intervention before submitting it for her module. This formative assignment represents a very early experience of writing at university for the student, who was given this question to answer:

Figure 1 here

The student's assignment brief explained that the task 'is designed to assess your understanding of the material in the Module, and to give you advice and support in how to write an academic piece of work.'

Multilayered Analysis based on Comparison of a Draft and Revised Assignment

i. Fulfilment of the assignment brief

The principle underlying the analytic framework in this article is the same as that guiding tutorial sessions: reading and analysis must first look at global issues within the paper, followed by increasingly local issues (Bharuthram & McKenna 2006).

Global issues are most likely to affect a student's mark, and, more importantly, they reflect a student's understanding of the material and disciplinary thinking they are

expected to display. Local issues include grammar, such as poorly defined sentence boundaries, and failure to follow referencing style guides appropriately.

Since the overriding issue for a successful paper must be whether the assignment answers all components of the brief, analysis focused on whether the assignment answered the set task. Students occasionally misconstrue assignment briefs, and, more frequently, they omit parts of the task or misplace their emphasis in addressing the task. Lecturers sometimes provide extensive guidance on the organisation of the assignment, and this guidance constitutes the generic shape of the paper. In disciplines where there is well-defined structure for assignments, understanding and reproducing this organisation may be an implicit or explicit learning outcome. An example of this would be scientific research reports, which have a distinctive structure (Kelly & Bazerman 2003). Either a failure to answer the question or a failure in organising the paper in accordance with disciplinary expectations (or explicit guidance) would have a negative impact on students' grades.

Judging whether a student has addressed the assignment brief appropriately is necessarily a qualitative judgement. Nevertheless, these judgements have to be the tutors' and the analysts' first concerns; they constitute crucial elements of tutors' expertise (Thompson 2009). The tutor who met with the student identified three areas of concern, two of which related to the top level organisation of the assignment:

- 'How to write fully-fledged paragraphs'
- 'How to map the main points and signpost'
- 'How to organise the essay with a central argument at its core'

These notes, which were written on the assignment, were the tutor's primary focus for the session.

Problems with mapping the main points, signposting, and organising a central argument were evident in the paper's introduction, which led into an incoherent paper.

In the initial draft, the first sentence simply reformulated the assignment title ('In this essay I will discuss why it is important to have personal and professional values while working as a social worker and through the social work process.'). However after restating the assignment title, the next sentence shifted to a discussion of transparency in decision-making, without linking *transparency* to *values*. This shift of focus suggests the student had not identified in her own mind the purpose of the essay. The introductory section of the student's draft also had pronouns and phrases that lacked a clear reference. For example:

...where it is necessary to make decisions about other people's futures that impact on their lives, *it* needs to be done in a transparent way. By working with individuals *in this manner* shows them you abide by a set of values.... (emphasis added)

It is not clear what *it* and *in this manner* refer to, which suggests that the student was unclear about the direction of her essay, and, because of that, the reader is left unsure of the thesis of the assignment.

The student's revised introduction, which she wrote by hand during the tutorial, shows significant improvement. It reformulated the topic in the student's own words: 'This essay will examine the importance of professional and personal values in the social work process.' The new introduction provided a definition of values and related these values to the profession and the individuals who work within it. It linked the decisions that social workers make about their clients to these values. This revision improved the start of the assignment by engaging in a more sophisticated way with the topic of the importance of personal and professional values within the social work process.

ii. Information structure

After evaluating whether a student has addressed the assignment brief tutors need to assess the information structure and sentence organisation or 'flow'. Systemic functional linguistics (SFL) offers tools that can help in this evaluation of students' writing (although these tools in themselves cannot assess whether a paper has followed a particular organisation, such as the 'Introduction, Methodology, Results, and Discussion' pattern). Traditional structural grammar describes the relatively unchanging structural character of words and their relationships, so that a word (like *ball*) is a noun and in a particular sentence (e.g., 'John threw the ball. '), it is the object of the verb. Unlike traditional structural grammar, SFL describes what a speaker or writer is trying to accomplish with a particular choice of words. In SFL (e.g., Martin & Rose 2003), 'Theme' and 'New' are parts of the information structure of a text. In a sentence, the Theme is usually the subject, whilst New information comments on that subject. Sometimes, however, there is a marked Theme, an atypical theme that comes before the subject. Often these themes signal new directions in the text, such as a change in time, participant, or logical relations (e.g., *in addition, however*), which may help organise the text or provide evaluative comments.

This relationship of Theme and New can be projected to texts longer than a single sentence; when used to describe the Theme and New elements of paragraphs, Martin and Rose (2003) use the terms 'hyperTheme' and 'hyperNew', whilst at the level of extended texts, they use 'macroTheme' and 'macroNew'. These terms represent thematic and new elements in the global structure of the text. They correspond closely with the setting out of the topic of an assignment in the introduction and the topic's development in the body. Because academic writing in English is explicit, the introduction frequently establishes the territory of the topic

(macroTheme) and then provides an indication of the approach that the assignment will follow in commenting on the theme (macroNew).

Besides the issues related to organisation that the tutor identified, she noted that the student needed to understand ‘how to write fully-fledged paragraphs.’ In the student’s initial draft, there were twelve paragraphs of three or four lines. These very short paragraphs did not develop topics or lead smoothly to the next paragraph or topic, but in the revised version the paragraphs were longer and much more fully developed with clearer main points that were more explicitly inter-related. Significantly, in the revised version, there were half as many paragraphs but, as each one was more substantial, the writer presented herself as more knowledgeable about the topic by expanding upon her ideas.

The student writer implemented the tutor’s advice to organise the assignment around a central argument, and her revision of individual paragraphs represents a substantial improvement in this regard. Importantly, the writer demonstrates an improved appreciation of how to develop ideas within individual paragraphs and link these together to form an argument. This is an important aspect of academic writing for students at every level, and the student’s revision of the draft after the one-to-one tutorial suggests that the impact of individualised tuition may extend to other writing projects at university.

iii. Sentence-level analysis

The next level of the analysis looked at the thematic organisation of the sentences. The thematic organisation indicates how successfully a text moves from one sub-topic to another. An analysis of thematic organisation can illuminate the coherence of an assignment, the extent to which it ‘flows,’ and the extent to which it stays on topic.

For purposes of analysis, texts were entered into tables, with each clause on a separate row of the table. Using a form of analysis based on MacDonald (1992; see also North 2005), Kelly and Bazerman (2003) compared the extent to which the student made a real-world phenomenon the subject of the sentence, or made the subject an epistemological item. Importantly, epistemological subjects include theories and research findings (such as 'X demonstrates that...'). Assignments that are overly descriptive tend to have more phenomena as subjects and fewer epistemological subjects. MacDonald's analytic framework did not significantly illuminate the student's text discussed here, but it proved quite informative in the analysis of some other students' assignments. Thematic progression was noticeably absent from the writer's initial draft, which jumped from one topic to another, but following her tutorial, the student's revised assignment read:

Figure 2 here

In this passage from the student's revised assignment, *Braye and Shoot (1995)* is the subject and theme of the first sentence. It is also an example of an epistemological subject, as the remainder of the sentence explains what Braye and Shoot claimed. *Value based working* is the theme of the second clause of the first sentence, whilst the effect of this way of working ('spreads through the entirety of social work practice') is the comment on the topic. Picking up the comment of *social work practice*, *many social workers* becomes the given information, whilst the new information is that *values in practice* guide social workers. In the initial draft the progression from one topic to another was frequently unclear, for example:

Figure 3 here

With some thought, we can realise that the student writer is connecting comment of the first sentence (*core values in social work*) with *beliefs*, the topic and subject of the next sentence but this connection is not made explicitly. In the revised assignment this passage is reworked to be more explicit:

Figure 4 here

iv. Vocabulary analysis

A variety of corpus linguistic tools has been developed to describe an academic register and measure whether students' vocabulary is appropriate to the context. Haswell (2000) used the percentage of words of nine or more letters, while Storch and Tapper (2009) use the presence of words from the Academic Word List (Coxhead 2000) at an increased level to identify texts that are more successful. We chose to focus on lexical density, the balance between grammatical words such as pronouns (e.g., *I, it, their*), auxiliary verbs (*is, was, have*) and prepositions (*on, above, with*) and, on the other hand, content words (e.g., *fortunate, values, person*). This relationship was analysed using a freely available software programme (Heatley et al. 2002).

Informal spoken language uses a greater proportion of grammatical words, whilst academic writing tends to use noun phrases that group ideas into complex bundles (e.g., *social work process, value-based working*). These phrases frequently carry concepts that are important to the discipline, but whose meaning may not be immediately apparent. Initially they make academic texts more difficult to read and to write, but ultimately they provide economical ways of expressing core concepts. One measure of development in students' use of an academic style is a decrease in the ratio of grammatical words to content-carrying words as part of the overall word

count of the text. In the sample assignment there was a shift towards fewer grammatical words. The shift was relatively small, from 269 grammatical words out of 509 (53% of the total) to 230 grammatical words out of 491 (47% of the total). Although small, this shift is indicative of a more formal, concentrated writing style. An example of the shift is provided in the first sentence of each text. Grammatical words are underlined in each:

Draft: In this essay I will discuss why it is important to have personal and professional values while working as a social worker and through the social work process. (16 grammatical words out of 28 total)

Final: Practicing social work means making decisions about peoples futures that have an impact on their lives. (6 grammatical words out of 16 total)

Another change was the elimination of the first and second person pronouns, (*I* and *you* or *your*), which the student had used throughout the paper. These pronouns, and particularly *you* and *your*, are characteristic of a spoken style, not the more appropriate formal style of academic writing. In the draft assignment the student wrote:

Where personal values could conflict with professional values is when you are assessing a service user.

Besides being overly informal, the use of *you* also creates distance between the writer and reader, in suggesting that the reader's values may conflict with their professional values. With relatively small changes, however, this sentence is made more appropriate:

Professional values could conflict with personal values when assessing a service user.

The later version is improved pragmatically and is less wordy and more formal. The increase in academic discourse and improved lexical density suggest that

the student learnt about these key issues during her writing tutorial and applied her knowledge in re-writing the assignment.

v. Proofreading errors

The final level of analysis looks at surface changes that do not substantially alter the fundamental meaning of the text. These include punctuation and spelling errors, sentence boundary errors (run-on sentences and sentence fragments), and other grammatical errors. Writing tutors do not ignore issues such as sentence breaks and problems with punctuation. Within the time constraints of tutorials, they provide guidance on appropriate grammar. Examples of the sorts of errors that the tutor suggested the student should correct included:

- Adding full stops at sentence ends
- Using apostrophes to indicate possession
- Eliminating sentence fragments and dividing run-on sentences

A careful, focused discussion of a grammatical issue during a tutorial does not ensure that a student will be able to produce the feature accurately in the future, and punctuation errors remained in the final draft. However, individual tutorials allow students to notice that these issues are considered important and that they occur in their own work. Like the more significant changes that they make, these corrections improve the quality of students' assignments.

Also included among proofreading errors would be referencing style errors. Particularly in early assignments, students often make errors in both in-text citations and in writing their List of References. In this sample assignment, failure to cite was not a problem although errors in applying the referencing style occurred. The student writer was unclear about how to use secondary sources, which require her to

acknowledge both the source she has read and the secondary author whose work is cited in that source. The tutor identified these errors, and the student corrected them in the revised draft.

A more fundamental issue with the student's draft assignment was the poor integration of sources into her argument about how personal and professional values are important to the social work process, but this was improved in her revised assignment:

Beliefs are the very essence of who we are and so steer us in a direction as opposed to another. They contribute to the way we perceive things and act, down to the judgements we make about society and the people in it (Beckett and Maynard 2005). Personal values by which we live by are often the pre-cursor into the social work arena as a profession. The driving force is often wanting to help people who we regard less fortunate than ourselves or who are damaged by society and its affects (Beckett and Maynard 2005: 11).

The student draws upon research in her field to revise the draft paragraph into a more scholarly discussion of values in social work. However, it was apparent from the draft version that the first citation to Beckett and Maynard (2005) should have been marked as referring to a secondary source. Referring at second hand is a challenging aspect of referencing for many first year students, who are usually new to scholarly referencing. However, in the revised version the writer deals with source material in a more confident manner because she has learnt from the writing tutor that her own argument must underpin and define how sources are deployed.

Conclusion

Given that the use of the case was intended to illustrate the model, any conclusions drawn about the impact of one-to-one tutorials in this context would not be appropriate. We are in the process of analysing data from a number of other students who used the writing centre service, and that analysis will guide tutor training as well as informing future writing instruction.

Alongside the strengths of this model, such as its ability to analyse texts that are not from a single discipline (Haswell, 2000, for instance, is a longitudinal study of writing only within Composition classes), there are limitations. One limitation of the model is that the issues identified need to be confirmed by disciplinary lecturers. In a quasi-experimental study, Williams (2004) found that when raters marked draft and final versions of student assignments after a writing centre tutorial, the improvement in grades was not substantial. If the issues that tutors identify as problems and that students revise after meeting with a writing tutor are not seen as significant by lecturers who mark the assignments, then tutors need to refocus their attention. We are beginning to address this limitation through discussions focused on the student texts with disciplinary lecturers. Another limitation is that this model does not assess the potential longer-term impact of one-to-one tutorials on student work, in that it focuses on redrafting a single assignment, rather than changes from one assignment to the next. Given the many areas of concern in student texts, it would not be surprising if students fail to incorporate all the writing tutor's advice into their practice. Nevertheless, long term, embedded change must be the goal of writing centre support. We hope to address this limitation with longitudinal data in the future.

Applying the model is time consuming, as is the case with many research projects. It necessitates getting access to early and final drafts of students' assignments, and the analysis can be painstaking. However, the authors believe that assessing student writers' outcomes, as well as their satisfaction with writing centre support, is professional and ethical, and should be part of writing centre's practice.

Returning to the questions which we posed at the beginning of the article:

- Can the changes students make after one-to-one writing tutorials be systematically described?
- What types of changes do students make to their draft assignments following tutorials?

- Are the changes students make in line with the topics discussed during tutorials?

The changes that students make can be systematically described using the model which looks at a hierarchy of engagement with the writing task. It allows for description of change at each level, and, with data collected from the tutorial, permits a comparison between the goals of the session and its outcomes. The changes that students make following tutorials can be traced and described, allowing evaluation of the effectiveness of the support provision. It should be re-emphasised that writing tutors involved in this study were not using a single approach to writing support beyond agreement on underlying principles highlighted earlier, and that they were not using the model in their discussion with students. The model is independent of the particular approach to writing support taken, seeking to describe change in students' writing. It should be noted that the model focuses on change without assuming linear progress.

In the current climate of financial constraint, we need to move beyond consideration of satisfaction and perception to measures of impact of the approaches that we take. The proposed model can be used to analyse the impact on student writing of individualised tutorial support, whether delivered face to face or in a blended learning environment. As this model is intended to be used to evaluate provision, the implications for policy and practice are indirect, determined by the results of a localised analysis. The findings of an evaluation using the model might suggest the value of extending one-to-one provision, modifying the approach taken, or providing additional training for tutors to make their support more effective.

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How important are personal and professional values while working through the overall social work process?

Figure 1: The student's assignment brief

Clause	Marked theme	Subject/theme	New
1		Braye and Shoot (1995)	stress that
2		value based working	spreads through the entirety of social work practice.
3		Many social workers	believe that 'values in practice' mould the profession.

Figure 2: Information structure in the student's **revised** assignment

Clause	Marked theme	Subject/theme	New
1		Clark (2000)	comments that
2		core values in social work	incorporate two components, that of care and control.
3		Which	can then be further broken down into four areas... [list]
4		Beliefs	are the very essence of
5		who we	are and so steer us in a direction...

Figure 3: Information structure in the student's **draft** assignment

Clause	Marked theme	Subject/theme	New
1		Clark (2000)	comments that
2		core values in social work	incorporate two components: care and control,
3		which	which can then be further broken down into four areas... [list]
4		Braye and Shoot (1995)	stress that
5		value based working	spreads through the entirety of social work practice.

Figure 4: Revisions to the information structure