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‘I feel that this writing belongs to a different kind of text, but if this is gonna get me a better mark...’: High-achieving Students’ Encounters with Multi-disciplinary Writing

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Abstract

High-achieving students are not often the focus of studies in academic transition. In the UK, the driver has frequently been the widening participation and retention agendas, resulting in an emphasis on supporting the ‘non-traditional’ student. This exploratory case study based in the Faculty of Modern and Medieval Languages at Cambridge University took academic writing as one aspect of transition and compared two transition points for undergraduate students of Modern Foreign Languages (MFL): from school or college into the first year and then into the year abroad as students adapt to expectations for dissertation writing. In a context where weekly tutorials arguably offer the ultimate space for development of student writing, the study unpacks students’ interpretations of institutional, disciplinary, tutor and genre-based expectations. The study drew on theories of academic literacies (Lea and Street 1998, Lillis and Scott 2007, and Russell *et al.* 2009) by viewing writing as socially constructed and ‘literacy’ as dependent on disciplinary context. Findings revealed the significance of the multi-disciplinary nature of the MFL course to students’ ability to adapt to writing at university. It is suggested that a focus on the end product rather than the writing process might hinder the students’ ability to adapt to new expectations and make the most of their tutorial time.

Introduction

This exploratory case study based in the multi-disciplinary context of Modern and Medieval Languages¹ at the University of Cambridge, compares undergraduate writing development at two key transition points: from A-level writing to weekly undergraduate essays and from these to the year abroad dissertation written during students’ placements abroad. In a context where weekly tutorials² arguably offer the ultimate space for development of student writing with the most able of students, the study unpacks students’ interpretations of disciplinary, tutor and genre-based expectations and considers implications for teaching and learning of relevance to the wider field. Drawing on Russell’s (1997) consideration of ‘motive’, it is suggested that the students in this study are driven more by the demands of assessment than by any concern to develop autonomy as writers in their disciplines. Findings revealed that these students still struggled to understand and ultimately negotiate expectations for writing between subjects. Wingate’s (2012: 27) call to consider the needs of all students equally as novices to writing in their disciplines is therefore reinforced and applied to a group of students who have only infrequently been the focus of academic writing transition studies to date.

¹ The Cambridge course is known as ‘Modern and Medieval Languages’, but is referred to here as ‘Modern Foreign Languages’ since no medieval languages were represented by the cases in this study. The Faculty also includes the department of Linguistics.

² Cambridge undergraduate tutorials are known as ‘supervisions’, but are referred to here using the former, more familiar term.

The range of sub-disciplines within MFL courses requires students to adapt to writing across a range of genres and subjects, which might include: Literature; History; Linguistics; Film; Art History and Translation, notwithstanding the various combined degree options. Even for those based in a single disciplinary context, it has been argued that offering students the opportunity for cross-disciplinary discussion of writing not only enhances employability, but might also provide a less face-threatening context in which to build confidence in their own discipline (Cuthbert *et al.* 2009: 141 and Saunders and Clarke 1997). This study therefore has implications beyond the MFL context.

Modern Languages in the UK

Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) as a discipline in the UK is commonly considered to be:

- a demanding choice better suited to high-achievers applying to 'elite' institutions (Gallagher-Brett and Canning 2011: 182, and Coleman 2011: 128);
- more easily accessible to students from grammar and/or independent schools (Coleman 2011: 129 and Worton 2009: 12);
- suffering from a decline in applicants in the UK since being marginalised within the Secondary curriculum (Coleman 2011 and Worton 2009: 2);
- recruiting from a broad range of disciplinary backgrounds (Gallagher-Brett and Canning 2011: 181); and
- multi-disciplinary in content, making demands of its teaching staff and students across a range of disciplines and genres (Coleman 2004: 148).

Modern languages are currently topical in the UK, featuring regularly in a press that often stresses the implications of the country's relatively poor reputation for second language learning (see Cook 2011, CILT 2011 and Edemariam 2010). Universities are urged to work with schools and raise the profile of MFL once more (Worton 2010 and Claussen 2004).

The Cambridge Context

The University of Cambridge is a collegiate university, often labelled 'elite' or recently even 'super-elite' (Shepherd 2011 and Paton 2011). It is the second oldest university in the UK and regularly features highly in global league tables. The university attracts many more undergraduate applicants than it can accommodate, and those admitted are normally amongst the highest-achieving of their cohort. Consequently, colleagues from both within and outside the UK are often surprised to hear that our students should encounter many problems adapting to academic writing. Cambridge students are academically very able and tutors have arguably the ultimate space to support the development of student writing in the form of personalised weekly tutorials and essays.³

The majority of Cambridge students, and the cases who informed this study, arrive from the same A-level curriculum as their peers at other UK universities. A minority will have taken other equivalent qualifications. Students' experiences of essay-writing are often dependent on their subject choices, which for MFL are extremely varied. Gallagher-Brett and Canning's data on subject choices indicate that no assumptions should be made regarding the preparedness of cohorts as a whole, regardless of academic ability (2011: 181–182). English Literature and History perhaps offer the most useful preparation for extended writing, especially if a student has been given the opportunity to submit an independent research project. Again, this experience varies since schools select from a range of curricula, some of which require little or no extended writing. Cambridge students normally achieve the highest grades; nevertheless, the process involved in submitting a written assignment within the rigid assessment structure of A-level, with opportunities to redraft and polish, is a world away from the weekly exploratory essay followed by a tutorial at Cambridge. These students are still making a transition to new institutional and disciplinary contexts, which can seem mysterious and intimidating at first. Lillis' reference to an 'institutional practice of mystery' (2001: 369) would certainly ring true in many cases. Assumptions about the existing capabilities of the 'Cambridge student' are made within

³ Practice varies according to discipline.

the institution and externally, and influence the degree to which academic transition needs are addressed explicitly.

Theories of genre acquisition and academic literacies (Lea and Street 1998, Lillis and Scott 2007 and Russell *et al.* 2009) challenge the assumptions made about such students, who must still adapt to new expectations for writing, regardless of their success in previous contexts (Wingate 2012: 27). What constitutes 'literacy' is dependent on disciplinary context, and writing is 'constructed' and informed by the dialogue between students and tutor and the prior histories and experiences of both. Tutors certainly do vary in their willingness and ability to address academic writing development explicitly during tutorial time (Wingate 2012). It is arguable that the average Cambridge student possesses the 'flexibility and determination within themselves to overcome considerable odds rather than becoming de-motivated [...]' (Macaro and Wingate 2004: 486). The majority of students persevere and work out what is required to succeed through 'prolonged exposure and a process of osmosis' (Nesi and Gardner 2012). The notion of the 'Cambridge student' is perhaps applied by some to whole cohorts, and assumes a homogenous student body and little need for explicit guidance. The quality and variability of the undergraduate learning experience has been a significant driver for the work of the University's Transkills project (CARET University of Cambridge n.d.(a)).

Methodological Influences

Of the range of previous studies on the topic of transition to modern languages degrees, the following resonated most strongly with our context:

Gallagher-Brett and Canning's (2011) small case study investigated 'disciplinary disjunctures' in MFL and challenges the notion that transition should be considered in the vertical, subject-specific sense alone. There are also 'horizontal disjunctures' between subject choices at A-level and 'diagonal disjunctures between non-language A-levels and languages degrees' (Gallagher-Brett and Canning 2011: 177–180). This reinforced my own initial findings, which suggested that there are too many disciplines and genres within MFL to consider academic transition from one subject-specific perspective. Students were therefore asked to compare their experiences across all of their A-level writing to discover more about the associated 'diagonal' impact on their university writing.

Harnisch, *et al.*'s (2011) action research study begins to track MFL students through more than one transition point, thus acknowledging that transition does not somehow 'end' following a couple of weeks' induction. This prompted my comparison of two transition points to assess the students' progression, represented by their confidence as authors and their ability to negotiate their own path through the complex network of tutor-, disciplinary- and genre-based expectations.

However, my study questioned whether transitions to academic writing are always linear, somehow implying a clear progression and 'improvement' throughout the course, especially in modern languages where students are required to engage with a range of sub-disciplines. My own research, grounded in theories of academic literacies, to use Lillis' (2001) emphasis on the plural, suggests that students often seem to begin again, some trying to 'unlearn' previous strategies or readjust to expectations with a new tutor. What constituted 'successful' essay-writing to one tutor might be different to another, even within the same language or sub-discipline. As Lea and Street state, this requires students to:

[...] switch practices between one setting and another, to deploy a repertoire of linguistic practices appropriate to each setting, and to handle the social meanings and identities that each evokes. (Lea and Street 1998:159)

This seemed especially relevant to the demands of the MFL course and was therefore a particular focus of this study.

In relation to Transition Point 2 and the emphasis on the undergraduate dissertation as a move towards student 'autonomy' (Greenbank and Penketh 2009), my study questioned to what extent final year students were writing to please their supervisor or examiner. The concept of 'authorial voice' was

used to pursue this issue within the context of students' actual draft texts rather than asking a direct question in interview. Drawing on Pittam *et al.*'s (2009) study of student authorship, Lillis' 'talk around text'⁴ methodology was used (see Lillis 2001 and 2008) to investigate the degree to which students felt able to assert their authority in cases where this might conflict with tutor recommendations.

Faculty of Modern and Medieval Languages

This study compared two key transition points in the Faculty of Modern and Medieval Languages:

Table 1: Expectations for Writing in the Faculty of Modern and Medieval Languages

| Transition Point 1: Year 1 | Transition Point 2: Years 3 and 4 |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Paired tutorials• Weekly or fortnightly 'essays'• Two languages• End of year exams | <p>Compulsory year abroad project</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 6–8,000 word year abroad dissertation or project• 4 hours of one-to-one tuition <p>Optional final year dissertation or project</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 8–10,000 word dissertation or project• 8–10 hours of tutorial time |

Transition point 1: the 'Cambridge essay'

Students generally attend weekly tutorials in pairs for each examination that they will sit at the end of the academic year. The format of tutorials varies, but students normally submit a weekly or fortnightly 'essay' (in English) on a topic given to them beforehand. Tutors offer verbal and written feedback, and overall performance, both in the essay and in discussion, will influence end-of-term (semester) reports, but will not affect a student's formal end-of-year examination result. Students and staff often talk of the need to master the 'Cambridge essay', which is arguably the starkest change from A-level writing for new students: returning to the origins of the word, the French *essayer* – 'to try', the essay serves as a starting point for further discussion. These essays are almost always researched and written prior to the 'taught input' that is the tutorial; they are certainly not expected to be the polished piece of writing that students are used to. One advantage of this kind of essay is the opportunity for students to experiment with disciplinary writing free from the constraints of the formal institutional assessment framework. At least, this is how some interpret the Cambridge essay. A recent online resource designed for first year History students made explicit an interpretation of the tutorial essay which some students may take much of the first year to understand and accept:

One big difference is that an A-level essay is usually your last word on a subject, following teaching; a supervision essay at Cambridge is your initial thoughts on a subject that you may not even have had lectures on. (CARET University of Cambridge n.d.(b))

It is clear that this is a major departure from the norm for many Cambridge students, and they may not be aware of their tutor's views on the purpose of the weekly essay. This is a new form of 'essay' to students who have been used to submitting their polished best efforts for scrutiny. The focus for the term will also differ between languages, and students might be required to write, to take some examples, literature, history, philosophy or film studies essays during their first term.

The tutorial is perhaps the ultimate 'talk around text' opportunity (Lillis 2008). It is also a space for 'talkback' on the writing process as well as feedback on the product (Lillis 2006: 42). Some tutors use the time to advise on the conventions of the language, department or sub-disciplines, to clarify their

⁴ See especially Lillis (2008: 359–361) for an outline of talk around text methodology and example data.

own particular preferences as a tutor or examiner and offer feedback for improvement. Others may focus more on subject content. Variation in approach is arguably evened out as the course progresses and students encounter new tutors.

Transition point 2. Year 4: the 'dissertation'

An interesting point of transition in MFL degrees is that of the extended writing required of students during their year abroad; a time of many competing challenges. Unlike most of their peers, Cambridge students will have already experienced two years of the tutorial mode and are accustomed to direct debate and criticism with a tutor and tutorial partner by the time they find themselves abroad. There is not the usual need to adapt to one-to-one discussion of writing at this point. The main challenge for many students is that this is their first experience of extended writing and the first opportunity in some time to draft and re-draft.

Cambridge students are required to write a 6,000–8,000 word dissertation or 'project' during their year abroad for submission at the beginning of their final year. Many students choose to submit the more traditional dissertation on a topic of their choice, although a significant number are drawn to the translation or linguistics project. Students are entitled to four hours' tutorial time for this assignment. Some students then submit a final year 'optional' dissertation in lieu of one examination. The final year dissertation/project is normally 8,000–10,000 words, for which they can expect 8–10 hours of tutorial time. The final year students in this study were just beginning work on their optional dissertation and were able to offer feedback on their experience of writing during the year abroad and of producing early drafts of their second dissertation.

Methodology⁵

Research questions

1. What challenges are first year students encountering as they adapt to expectations for essay writing in MFL at Cambridge? Do they relate these challenges to their previous learning and writing experiences?
2. How did final year students adapt to expectations for the year abroad dissertation? As final year students, do they feel more able to assert their independence and authority as authors of their extended projects?

The Year 1 and Year 4 MFL cohorts were invited to join two focus groups at the start of the academic year. These groups, each of five students, represented the two transition points and discussion was led by the initial research questions. Themes emerging from both discussions were then followed up in a series of semi-structured interviews in the second term with six of the original group. (See Table 2.) The final year students were asked to bring along annotated drafts of their optional dissertation and were invited to highlight sections in response to three questions asked in advance:

1. Sections they were pleased with
2. Sections they had found difficult to produce
3. Areas where they felt their 'authorial voice' was most evident.

Students were not offered any definitions of the concept of 'voice' in the hope that their own interpretation would emerge.

Discussion and interview transcripts were analysed and annotated by theme and students' highlighted texts cross-referenced with interview data.

⁵ It is important to stress that methodology was affected by the fact that only one researcher was able to work on the study part-time over a period of one academic year. If resources had permitted, first year student texts would also have been analysed and tutors interviewed. The study was exploratory in preparation for a larger, longer-term project.

Table 2: Interview participants

| Interview participants | |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Year 1 | Year 4 |
| Student A | Student D |
| German and French | Spanish and Russian |
| A-level: English/French/German/Music | A-level: French/Spanish/History/Maths |
| Student B | Student E |
| German and French | French and Spanish |
| A-level: French/German/History/Maths | A-level: French/Spanish/History/Greek |
| Student C | Student F |
| Spanish and French | Italian and French |
| A-level: French/Spanish/Maths | A-level: Maths/Music/French/History |

Findings

Subjects and genres: Year 1

Early focus group discussion revealed the confusion experienced by even the most able of writers as they sought to distinguish between and interpret: a) the expectations of a particular tutor, b) the differences between courses or languages and c) disciplinary/genre conventions.

Student A was very aware that she had been asked to write a History essay for German when she had not taken the subject since year nine in Secondary School. She had taken English Literature at A-level and was therefore very comfortable with writing her French literature essays. She talked at length about how uncomfortable she was with History essays, despite the fact that her performance in the latter had been no worse:

[...] I feel much more clueless about the History essays [...] Maybe it's the difference between History and literature but I think my German supervisor is a lot more concerned about content and, like, I'm sure I don't write very well-structured essays at all [...] Or it might be that that's erm more of a disciplinary...it's difficult to tell...last term we did philosophy essays and now we're doing History essays [...] He hasn't touched on that at all that it needs to...whether it needs to be sort of a different style so erm...either that's cos we're supposed to work it out for ourselves or it should be the same.

It seems that part of the confusion here for the student relates to the variation in practice between her French and German tutors. The French tutor will remark on structure of argument where the German tutor will concentrate more on content and quality of argument. However, at this early stage, the student is uncertain whether this is in fact a disciplinary difference in expectations. This student had not yet had the opportunity to write a literature essay for German and was therefore unable to compare.

At this early stage in her first year, she also appears to be uncomfortable with the lack of control she is able to take of the material in her History essays:

It feels that none of what I write in a History essay is my own...I'm just writing facts...and I don't have any basis of facts in my head because I haven't studied history at school at all so everything I write in a history essay comes out of books.

This reinforces Pittam *et al.*'s study in which students reported that they felt more an 'editor' of other people's facts and opinions than authors (2009:156). Subsequent discussion with academic colleagues in the Faculty revealed a difference in the way History is incorporated into the different courses. The Spanish and French departments are more likely to teach History in connection with particular texts, while German and Russian teach the subject in its own right around particular periods and events in history. So, this is another layer of confusion for some students if they are working between the two approaches. Student B, taking the same languages, was certain that 'if I had not taken History, this course would be so hard'.

These two students felt that their prior subject choices impacted on their ability to meet expectations for writing – at least at first. In a discipline with a declining number of applicants, requiring particular subjects could be damaging, and therefore universities need to consider how to take account of prior subject experience as they support students at this stage in their writing development.

Subjects and genres: Year 4

This theme emerged for final year students whose year abroad project permitted them to choose between a traditional dissertation, a translation project or a linguistics project in either of their languages. Expectations for all three are clearly laid out for students in a handbook and they had all already submitted their year abroad project. However, with the full range of sub-disciplines and genres available, they were still switching between expectations. The students had all had initial tutorials for their second 'optional' dissertation.

One student indicated in the focus group that she had had a great deal of difficulty working on her translation project during the year abroad; she mentioned the 'translation commentary' and how she had clearly not understood what one actually looked like. On a basic assignment level, she had difficulty relating the project to her previous writing experience: 'It's not an essay, and it's not a research project [...] A research project is not a dissertation.' The practicalities of being abroad as she attempted this kind of project for the first time and time management difficulties as she juggled her placement alongside did not help matters. It would have been interesting to follow this up during interview, but unfortunately this student did not volunteer.

There was further evidence of struggle with genre and theory for student F, who compared her linguistics project with her film study:

The difference in language was incredible [...] between the linguistics project, which I did for my year abroad and this project (film study) so the language was constantly changing even in English. [...] I couldn't understand why I was getting these two contradictory ideas [...] Why is it that in none of the criticism about this film, nobody is making any kind of distinction between the audience?

This student had difficulty articulating why she was confused to her tutor; she was circling around the kind of reader-response theory that would probably have been explicitly covered in a full literature degree, but which she had not encountered at this point. Reinforcing Macaro and Wingate's (2004) findings, she saw this as a challenge rather than a setback, and her tutor was able to guide her reading.

Student D had highlighted a 'flourish' (her words) in her draft as being something she was pleased with: 'In a sense, undernourishment, particularly in women, was like a second string on the bow of communist dedication.' The student was uncomfortable with this sentence because she felt it belonged to a different kind of text:

People are reading it as an intellectual, whatever, academic thing, and I feel like (this kind of phrase) [...] belongs more to poetry [...] I feel that this writing belongs to a different kind of text.' [...] If this is gonna get me a better mark, then I'm gonna invent little sentences like this that they're gonna like.

This student's awareness of this text as ultimately being an assessed piece of writing in fact encouraged her to contrive more of these kinds of phrases in later drafts. This relates to Russell's discussion of the conflicting demands of the classroom/university genre and the disciplinary/professional genre. The former is likely to be more important to the student and impacts on their motives (Russell 1997: 18).

'Authorial voice': Year 1

It was perhaps quite early on for first year students to have a view on 'voice', but their comments proved to be an interesting comparison with those of the final year students. Students responded spontaneously during their interview, defining 'voice' as:

- Which facts, anecdotes and conclusions you choose [...] none of what I write is my own (in History essays). (Student A)
- Your opinion. The line you take. (Student C)
- A writer's true voice and opinion evident in their style and ideas [...] my tutorial partner was advised that her voice was too assertive. (Student B)

These comments reflected a range of interpretations, and any further study would usefully explore the tutors' perspectives. It would also be useful to look at the students' essays with feedback to see whether their views were reflected in the text at all. For example, how did this 'assertiveness' manifest itself in the student's essay? Was the tutor referring to the text at word level or to an inappropriate degree of authority in the student's dismissal of established scholars and their ideas? Is it of benefit to a student early on in their writing development to be told that their voice is too 'assertive'? This seems to reinforce Batchelor's suggestion that 'students gain the voices they are allowed or invited to have' (2008: 40). What is surprising is that tutors often report that first year students are too tentative in their arguments and that their writing lacks a sense of authority in both 'tone' and quality of argument. It would be interesting to see how this student's subsequent writing was affected by this early feedback. Student A's response hints at the importance of originality to her. She was not happy feeling as though she was collating the material of others. Originality, or a 'new approach', is central in the Faculty's marking criteria for first class writing in exams or dissertations, and these students are accustomed to aiming high.

Student B focused more on 'style' and 'expression', which adds another layer of complexity to the concept of 'voice' by referring to the choices they make in selecting reading, their position in relation to the question and conveying a sense of authority. This foreshadowed comments by the final year students with three years of assessed writing under their belts.

Authorial voice: Year 4

The final year students had been given more time to reflect on the concept of 'authorial voice' and had highlighted sections of their drafts where they felt voice, as they were defining it, was most evident. Student D's tutor seemed to be defining her voice for her. When asked to explain why she was pleased with particular sections, the reason was that her tutor had told her she should be; it reflected her (the student's) 'voice': '[...] the bits *she* (student's emphasis) said she thought was my voice [...] that's silly isn't it? Does it matter what other people think?' The highlighting exercise prompted her to elaborate further. Her comments revealed an interpretation of voice that was represented at word and phrase level; a writer's individual 'style' and expression:

[...] something that makes it 'yours', that distinguishes your style, you know. Lots of people could write *War and Peace* but only one Tolstoy wrote it. [...] How he's written it... I don't know ...I feel like the voice is to do with the *how*.

This student was also clear on why she was less pleased with particular sections: 'I couldn't find myself in amongst everyone else's arguments. I couldn't make anything original'.

The theme of originality was expanded on by Student F, who felt that voice involved 'adding a further distinction to the debate' and 'an opinion that hasn't been expressed before'. To her, 'voice' meant more than conveying her opinion; it needed to be a *new* opinion.

'Autonomy': Year 4

The first years were clearly still in transition stage, working out basic expectations and negotiating a way through the sometimes conflicting feedback of their tutors. In contrast, the final year students had a firmer idea of their writing process and 'style' since they were fresh from submitting their first dissertation. However, the extent to which they felt able to disregard tutor feedback and follow their own inclinations was apparently limited within the constraints of an assessed piece of writing.

Student E was unusual in her preference for the year abroad writing experience over the final year where students benefit from double the contact time with tutors. Tutoring during the year abroad had necessarily been more 'hands off', which in fact suited her writing process: 'I like chipping away at

things [...] people just immediately assume that everyone is going to leave it to the last minute [...] I've got my way of doing it'. This student felt pressured by her final year tutor to produce new drafts at frequent intervals which did not fit with her own, now tried and tested, approach, which in fact demonstrated significant self-discipline. There is perhaps a temptation to focus on the product rather than the writing process during tutorials. This case would support McDowell's (2008: 433) suggestion that 'by viewing only the end product of an assignment, some important knowledge about the learners is missed'. In this case, an early discussion of their respective research and writing processes would have helped as deadlines were set. Tutors are matched to students through a particular subject, but may have completely conflicting approaches to the writing process. I asked the student if she had felt able to express her preferences with her tutor and her response revealed her awareness of the context and purpose of her writing: 'You automatically sub-consciously agree with the tutor because they're more qualified than you [...] you kind of feel like you should agree'.

Of course, the tutor may have been more open to negotiation than the student gave them credit for. This student was hinting at a new confidence and autonomy in her own approach and decisions, but this did not really extend to her assessment of her own writing. When asked why she was pleased with some highlighted sections of her draft, she said: 'the reason why I'm pleased with them is because my tutor likes them.' Her audience was very much her tutor and ultimately her examiner.

Student F had found it impossible to accept her tutor's criticism of her 'meandering' style of argument; so confident was she in her style after three years of submitting writing, that she sought a second opinion from another member of staff. However, this confidence in her own view is at odds with a comment she made about responding to tutor feedback: 'He was very critical about it...erm, which was fine but then I guess, you know that kind of shapes your idea of [laughs] your own work'. In this case, it seems unlikely that the tutor's feedback altered her own views of her writing. The student had finally reached the point where she felt able to reject criticism relating to the structure of her argument. Student D was too aware of the purpose of her dissertation to follow her own instincts and remove her 'flourishes', however uncomfortable this made her. She resolved to contrive similar phrases to please her tutor in future in order to 'get extra marks.'

This brings us back to the purpose of the undergraduate dissertation as assessed writing rather than a move towards the kind of research published in the discipline. Any inclination these students felt to assert their authority over their writing was contained by their desire to write what will conform to the expectations of their assessors, who must themselves interpret departmental criteria.

Implications

Tutorials: the ultimate space?

Tutorial time itself was not the only factor impacting on students' writing experiences; there were tensions between the student's developing writing process and their tutor's own approach. Cambridge offers space for explicit discussion of expectations and the opportunity to tailor guidance to individuals, but it sometimes seemed as though student and tutor were talking past one another, both focused on the *outcome*, which is preparation for, or an actual piece of, assessed writing, rather than being explicit about the *process* leading to the essay itself. Any future study would ideally seek to uncover more about the interactional nature of the tutorials and their role in developing writing to obtain the tutors' perspective. As Wingate (2012: 28) reminds us, tutors can be reluctant to take responsibility for student writing, and in a context where tutorial teaching is devolved to colleges, there are substantial numbers to work with. Wingate and Tribble (2012: 484) speculate that the Oxbridge tutorial system is perhaps the only context in which Academic Literacies pedagogy would thrive and this study's multi-disciplinary context would be a useful test.

Disciplines, genres and conventions

Students at both transition points experienced difficulties understanding and differentiating between the expectations of their tutor, their disciplines and the range of textual conventions. The very first term is spent adapting to the exploratory style of the 'Cambridge essay', but MFL students are also juggling conflicting disciplinary conventions. The tutorial essay is also different from the exam essays which students are ultimately assessed on. Neither type reflects the kind of text published in their

disciplines, creating an artificial 'classroom' genre (Russell 1997: 18) linked too closely with assessment for students to differentiate between what is discipline-, tutor- or genre- specific. Cuthbert *et al.*'s (2009) suggested multi-disciplinary writing groups might also benefit tutors, increasing their awareness of expectations outside of their discipline leaving them well-placed to emphasise the differences in their own. Even within a single discipline, it is easy to become caught up in teaching one particular genre of many and lose sight of what underpins difficulties for the novice writer.

Student autonomy

Can the undergraduate writing experience, constrained by the assessment process, ever be about supporting students to move towards autonomy as an author? The final year students in this study certainly felt that this would be a risky step to take, however frustrated they felt at having a particular mode of writing or 'style' recommended to them. One student was disappointed that her year of hard work would in fact only be read by one or two people. Perhaps an undergraduate journal would be a useful opportunity for students to feel free to explore and share different approaches with a wider audience, but the demands of their workload suggest that the journal would struggle to attract submissions.

Conclusion

This study was too small to generalise, and findings are by no means representative of the cohorts, the institution or the broader MFL landscape. However, they do suggest that high-achieving students experience similar uncertainties to those from less 'traditional' backgrounds. It is unhelpful to make assumptions about any cohort's ability to adapt without explicit guidance and discussion of genre and discipline. The multi-disciplinary nature of the MFL course was significant in students' reported challenges, but could itself be used effectively as a context in which to offer tutors and students the chance to discuss writing across the disciplines more widely as well as within the institutional assessment framework.

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