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Improving student writing at HE: putting literacy studies to work

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Abstract

This paper builds on research into academic writing and student literacy, arguing that a focus on epistemology and institutional context should inform the teaching of writing in higher education. It explores the experience of UK undergraduate students of English, including those studying joint honours, to demonstrate their negotiation of complex and conflicting institutional and literacy practices. The paper suggests that the epistemology of humanities and social science subjects could be made more explicit to students; and proposes pedagogy to demystify the nature of academic writing and to develop the collaborative writing skills appropriate to a literate and critical society.

Key words or phrases:

Academic literacy/ student writing/ higher education/ pedagogy/ student experience/ transition/ progression/ English/joint honours/ assessment

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Improving student writing at HE: putting literacy studies to work

Over recent years, research into academic writing has moved away from the deficiency model of student literacy. Lea and Street (1998), Creme and Lea (1999) and Lillis (2001) have argued that academic literacy is not a transparent medium of expression but a negotiated discourse which is embedded in the practices and power relations of the academy. Ganobcsik-Williams (2004: 36) suggests that Lea and Street's (1998) "academic literacies" model promotes "a more encompassing understanding of the nature of student writing within institutional practices, power relations and identities". She argues for an "institutional approach" to the development of writing. Wingate (2006: 426) similarly argues for a pedagogy that focuses less on technical skills of writing (sentence, paragraph and essay construction *per se*) than on "developing students' deeper understanding of knowledge". Recent focus group studies of the experience of undergraduate students in the UK (Hodgson 2010; 2011) consider students' writing in relation to their grasp of subject epistemology rather than in terms of "atomised" (Lea and Street 1998: 158) skills. We aim to develop the significance and implications of this approach in this paper, which will argue that a detailed focus on institution and epistemology would benefit pedagogical approaches to the teaching of writing in higher education.

The assessed essay is an overwhelmingly important factor in the experience of undergraduate students of English and of other subjects in the humanities and social sciences. In most institutions, such students are asked to do relatively little writing when compared to their pre-university studies, but most of this writing is in the form of a discursive essay that comprises a large part, if not the totality, of the assessment regime (Krause 2001: 150; Gawthrop and Martin 2003: 42; Hodgson 2010: 27). As nearly all the 35 students of English interviewed in a recent focus group study (Hodgson 2010) pointed out, essay

writing was by far their most significant academic activity, as the greater part of their assessment depended on it. In the words of a third-year student: “Writing is the only thing that matters on the course” (Hodgson 2010: 4). Yet it is generally agreed, by students and tutors alike, that successful academic writing is, for many students, a matter of concern (Davies *et al* 2006).

The problem has traditionally been analysed in terms of a deficit in students’ academic capability. This discourse is found both in the corridors of the academy and in some of the professional literature. The Royal Literary Fund report *Writing Matters* (Davies *et al* 2006) implicates pre-university teachers in its critique of undergraduate writing. The introductory chapter to the report laments the passing of an age when “the teaching of grammar and the formalities of written expression were ... regarded as essential to sound pedagogical practice”. Moreover, the report suggests, many contemporary students “find themselves living in linguistic contexts that simply don’t correspond to traditional expectations”. These “contexts”, it implies, may involve differences in class, race, and technological practice. “The home language of many students in Britain today is not necessarily standard English,” and: “If you spend much of your day listening to CDs, texting friends, speaking on your mobile, watching DVDs or surfing the Internet, then you are not reading in the traditional manner” (Davies *et al* 2006: xii-xiii).

Commenting on deficit accounts of academic literacy, Haggis (2006: 533) insists on the futility of blaming the student: “It is the responsibility of the teacher, not the learner, to consider what might need to be changed.” It is easy to dismiss the deficit model as a nostalgic discourse that seeks to construct the problems it so graphically describes. However, the Royal Literary Fund report goes on to make a cogent analysis of writing as a social practice, and to stress the importance of recognising the enormous social and educational changes that have led to the present generation of

undergraduates. Significantly more students now progress to higher education compared with even a generation ago. Widening participation in higher education has ensured that many young people who, had they been born 30 years before, would have left school at 16 or 18 to go directly into work, now expect and are expected to enter university. (This may change, of course, as a result of the recent unprecedented reductions in public financing for English higher education.). It is hardly surprising that, as a result, university teachers have found themselves confronted by students with different kinds of cultural capital than before (Hodgson and Harris 2010).

If the nature of the student population has changed in the last 30 years, the nature of universities, and of university study, has also changed in some respects. While assessment in English and many other subjects is still conducted largely by means of the traditional academic essay, student experience and expectations have shifted. Courses are now frequently modular in structure, and students sometimes complain that they feel little more than a number (Hodgson 2010: 23). The point of this paper is not to indulge in nostalgia for an assumed past condition or in criticism of contemporary culture and young people's preoccupations, but to insist that the nature of student literacy has to be understood within an institutional context. Lea and Street (1998) argue that academic literacies work at the level of epistemology and personal identity: effective essay writing is not a simple reproduction and transmission of preconceived ideas, but constructs the knowledge and the academic identity of the writer. The writing that students do in their transitional year - the first year of university - may thus be crucial: it "brings with it new challenges and demands, requiring acculturation on behalf of the writer" (Krause 2001: 150). Gurlay (2009: 183) suggests that a student's transition into a university environment "inherently and 'normally' involves an emotional process of change which may be destabilising and challenging in terms of a student's sense of identity". She refers to research (Beard, Clegg

and Smith 2007; Christie 2008; Barnett 2007) that describes the emotional journey of becoming a student in higher education. "Normal" experiences are, of course, culturally patterned, and the transition to higher education is a social as well as an emotional process. For students to succeed, not least as writers, they have to understand and come to terms with the language and culture of the academy, which Lillis (2001: 159) describes as "socially situated discourse practices".

Recent studies of the undergraduate experience of English in UK universities exemplify what these "discourse practices" may mean in the lived experience of contemporary students. The following account is based on two focus group studies involving a total of 59 students in eight institutions, including pre-92, post-92 and Russell Group universities (Hodgson 2010, 2011). The students were interviewed in small groups (17 in total), using a schedule devised in conjunction with the English Subject Centre; all the sessions were recorded and transcribed for discourse and conversation analysis. Further details of the methodology can be found in the original studies.

For many first year students of English, a major problem of university life is what to read and how to manage their time. This is related to a larger issue: what kind of reading do the tutors want? Very few of the student participants in the focus groups had had any significant pre-university encounter with the cultural theory that underpins contemporary literary study (and, we shall later argue, a wide range of other humanities and social science subjects). They had learned instead to read whole literary texts in detail. One student expressed her shock at the transition: "You get given this big reading list at the start of the term. I'm used to being in school where you're telling me go and read this specific book. I can't do all this huge long list. It's the big unknowns like that. Trying to guess what you should be doing a lot of the time" (Hodgson 2010: 9). Looking back, a third-year student said that the main difficulty of transition

was "trying to understand what [the tutors] are looking for" (Hodgson 2010: 29). Snapper (2009) has given a graphic account of a silent first year seminar (on Caryl Churchill's play *Cloud Nine*) where students drown in incomprehension because the lecturer, rather than building on the knowledge that students bring from their A-level studies, asks questions at a high level of abstraction that relate to her own theoretical agenda.

It became clear in the first focus group study that students' difficulties in managing their reading were connected to their difficulties with writing. Much of the students' reading was done in preparation for an essay. They would read, or felt that they should read, to prepare for seminars; but, as one student put it, you didn't get a pat on the back for performance in seminars; credit was given only for written expression in the form of an essay (Hodgson 2010: 4). The importance of every essay in determining progression or final degree class (symbolised by the ritual aspect of submission, and the time scale in returning the work to the student) affected every aspect of university study. Students sometimes did not understand how to relate what they heard in lectures and seminars to the crucial essays that they had to write. One said: "It's not that I didn't understand necessarily what the lecturers were talking about, but I didn't understand where I was supposed to go with that - the direction" (Hodgson 2010: 9). Other researchers have commented on the demoralising effect on many students of struggles with essay writing (Davies *et al* 2006: xii). This is related to a recurrent theme in the interviews: the solitariness of university study in English. If what really matters is the individually written essay, students will spend a good deal of time in isolated academic study: reading, preparing to write, and writing their assessed essay. It is curious, in view of contemporary understandings of language as socially constructed and learned (Carter 1997: 120), to note that the mode of study on which university students of English place most importance, and to which they

devote much of their time, is individual reading and writing of essays for high-stakes assessment.

A related and frequent comment was that too little written work was expected, especially as everything submitted counted towards final assessment. Students of English compared the A-level regime of relatively frequent essays, formatively assessed, with the university regime of a few long essays, most or all of which were assessed as part of the coursework component of the degree. One student asked for weekly assignments "which would help us to focus what we should be looking at in the text". This, she suggested, would create "a kind of system in the mind for getting an essay done" (Hodgson 2010: 26). A recurrent comment was the uneven pattern of work throughout the academic year, so that an extended period when no written submission was expected would be followed by a period where two or more essays had to be written concurrently. For all but the most self-regulated, this presented significant problems of time management.

The form of writing most often undertaken by students of English Literature was the discursive essay, but students taking courses in English Language and Creative Writing also had opportunities to produce "original" literary texts. The latter sometimes received feedback and evaluation from their peers as well as from the tutor. However, some students noted that it was more difficult to gain a high 2.1 or first class mark for Creative Writing modules, and regretted taking them for this reason (*cf.* the student comments recorded by May [2008]). It appeared that an implicit hierarchy of value existed in many universities whereby Creative Writing, despite its apparent legitimacy, did not have the credibility or significance of the critical literary essay (Hodgson 2010: 28).

In addition to the assessed coursework essay, many students had the opportunity to write “non-assessed” essays, especially in the first year. Practice here varied widely, some institutions placing more emphasis on this than others. Where “non-assessed” essays were in fact given formative comment, and the writer invited to meet with the tutor to discuss this, the students valued the opportunity more than in those departments where the initiative was left to the student and the staff offered merely a notional opportunity for such a formative work (Hodgson 2010: 28).

Generally, students accepted the assessments and feedback comments given by their tutors. Nonetheless, there was a good deal of feeling amongst most of the students that the mark given for an essay depended on the subjective opinion of the tutor, and no-one indicated awareness of any system of moderation or collaborative assessment (except in the case of the peer assessment of Creative Writing and language work). Many felt that the system of anonymous marking, amongst other distancing factors, prevented their tutors from even recognising them as the authors of their essays; consequently, feedback lacked holistic developmental focus and appropriate specificity. Opinion varied regarding the quality of written feedback. Some students felt that this was not as helpful as it might have been, because they often could not translate tutors’ comments into practical action. According to Elton (2010: 156), “many teachers’ comments which [students] find on their writings are almost Delphic in their obscurity.” (Lea and Street [1998], Chanock [2000] and other researchers have also discussed this problem.) Almost all students agreed that the long period between submitting an essay and receiving feedback limited the usefulness of the comments, especially (as was often the case) if the student had moved to an alternative module with a different tutor (Hodgson 2010: 28).

These comments give, we think, an account of the experience of contemporary undergraduates within the institutional context of higher education in general and of English studies in particular. The problem of learning to write successfully within this context is exacerbated in the case of joint honours students. Lea and Street (1998) point out that these students are particularly challenged by the need to switch between linguistic practices, social meanings and identities. By way of illustration, Lea and Street give an example of a student taking a joint honours course in History and Anthropology. He had received positive feedback for his History essay, but his Anthropology tutor had been highly critical of his “lack” of “structure and argument” in the Anthropology essay. The student, however, could not understand how the essay lacked structure and felt that he had presented a coherent argument in his writing. “What may be at stake,” comment Lea and Street (1998: 166), is determination of what is involved in a particular discipline:

The tutor in this case may see anthropology as requiring different conceptions of knowledge ... than did the history tutor, for whom clear summary of the facts in appropriate sequence was sufficient evidence of a “carefully argued and relevant essay”.

The focus group study of joint honours students in UK universities provides further evidence of ways in which such students have to negotiate a variety of differing tutor expectations and subject epistemologies. A joint honours student in English and History explained: “In History, literature will come up as a primary source, whereas in Literature you concentrate on the text and work out to the historical context.” She had to be careful, she said, when doing a resource analysis in history: “I’ll analyse the source of it too much, like I would in a Literature style, when I should expand the historical context.” Similarly, a joint honours student in English and Philosophy had been told not to worry if she didn’t fully understand philosophers’ writings: she should read secondary texts and balance the arguments of the commentators. This was a very

different procedure from the demands of literary study as she understood them, where "you write what you think (about primary texts)". A joint honours student in English and Psychology remarked: "Sometimes it's very difficult if I've got two assignments to do around the same time -- having to switch that mindset." Her English tutor had criticised her repeated use of the phrase "it could be argued that". "But in Psychology," she exclaimed, "you can't just make a claim out of thin air!" She felt that her English and Psychology tutors were looking for very different things. "In Psychology they really want you to look at other people's work and critique it: say, for example, this paper was good but there was a small sample size." By comparison, English tutors, in her view, "tend not to look for any critique of arguments. They just want you to pick up on what is there and really go deeper and analyse it" (Hodgson 2011: 11).

One area where tutor and subject expectations clearly varied was that of referencing and bibliography. English tutors tended to ask students to submit a full bibliography with their essays, whereas tutors in other subjects - for example, Psychology and Criminology - required only a list of texts referenced. One student commented that he thought this difference arose from English tutors' excessive concerns about plagiarism; like most of the other students in the study, he called for greater uniformity of practice (Hodgson 2011: 12). Evidence of this kind supports Lea and Street's account of academic literacy as involving "student negotiation of conflicting literacy practices". Recent studies by McKenna (2003), Nesi and Gardner (2007) and Elton (2010) support this perspective and highlight the varying literacy demands of different disciplines. Student writing, in this view, is "meaning making and contested" (Lea and Street 1998: 172): the experience of the students quoted demonstrates that writing an essay in an appropriate manner involves an awareness of the epistemology of the subject and of the professional discourses surrounding it.

At this point, it might be objected that the insights afforded by the focus group studies and anthropological approach to academic literacy lack practical application: how can teachers of writing intervene in such a complex and contested field? If the literacy practices of subject disciplines vary in crucial ways - if, indeed, there are multiliteracies within the academy - it would seem impossible to assist students except from within the subject discipline. This way of viewing the situation resembles the approach of the *Language across the Curriculum* movement of the 1970s (Britton 1970/1975), which proposed that every teacher be responsible for students' grasp and use of the language of their subject. Unfortunately, it appears that some university teachers do not see this as their role or may indeed lack the knowledge to intervene effectively, relying instead on exhortations to students to improve their "clarity", "analysis", "structure" and "argument" (Lea and Street 1998: 162), without necessarily having insight into the nature of these discursive features within their own subject discourse.

However, it may be that the literacies of the academy are today not as varied as they may initially appear. Two students in the joint honours study mentioned above pointed out that the academic essay has certain generic similarities across a range of subjects. The first, who was following a joint course in English Literature and Politics, said that he structured all his essays in three parts and usually gained positive feedback. The second, who studied English Literature and Publishing, suggested that the reports she had to write in a publishing course were not as different in style from an academic essay as they might appear. "You always take a theory and apply it to something – whether this is literary theory that I applied to a certain kind of text, or I take a theory about social behaviour and apply it to a marketing context" (Hodgson 2011: 12).

As Lea and Street (1998: 170) suggest, the key differences in the kind of writing required by different academic disciplines are epistemological: they are “defined through implicit assumptions about what constitutes valid knowledge within a particular context, and the relationships of authority that exist around the communication of these assumptions”. One of the present writers’ experience, over the last 12 years, of running an academic writing workshop within a new University suggests that, because of the pervasive influence of the epistemology of Cultural Studies upon a wide range of subjects - from English Literature through Social Psychology to International Relations - many university teachers’ assumptions about what constitutes valid knowledge across a range of humanities and social science subjects are essentially similar. This can be illustrated by the following list of essays in progress that students have recently brought to the workshop. In some cases, the essay could clearly have come from a range of disciplines, and, even where the subject of origin is clear from the wording of the question, the cultural concepts resemble those embedded in essay titles from other disciplines.

1. How significant were notions of racial otherness in the construction and maintenance of nineteenth century colonialism?
2. What do you understand by the critic’s suggestion that “it is through negatives, absences, understatements” that Anne becomes a presence for the reader?
3. Choose a serious crime(s) within the last 50 years and critically discuss possible causes with reference to two theories of crime. Support your argument with empirical evidence.
4. A number of writers studied on this module are pre-occupied with and affected by radical changes in attitudes towards money, consumption, and wider forms of commodity culture. Explore these changes.
5. Discuss ways in which social networking sites and mobile phones may affect social practices and behaviours in physical and virtual spaces.

6. Discuss the ways in which notions of change, exchange and balance can be seen to influence the thinking and actions of the principal characters in *Volpone*.
7. Discuss the main differences between modern and non-modern societies
8. Explore the individual's encounter with "otherness" in the two stories by Conrad.
9. Discuss the representation of women as "subsidiary" or "marginal" in two or more early modern plays studied on the module.
10. To what extent, and in what ways, does Farrell show history as a discursive process in which human agency is problematical?
11. Explore the ways in which Pat Barker's *Regeneration* seeks to redefine notions of gender in relation to historical experience.
12. Using psychological research on identity, discuss what it means to be white.

The reference to 19th century colonialism in the first essay title suggests that this comes from History, but the focus on "notions of racial otherness" indicates that what is at stake here is the influence of ideas on the historical process, which is seen in terms of "construction" of a practice (colonialism). To understand the import of the essay, the student needs to have grasped Edward Said's (1978) concept of otherness, to understand a particular academic use of the term "construction", and to realise that the grasp of these concepts is crucial to a successful piece of writing, despite the commonsense view that history concerns facts and events. Again, the name of a character Anne indicates that the second essay title relates to the study of literature, in this case a Jane Austen novel; but understanding the reference to "negatives, absences, understatements" requires a knowledge of cultural theory (Saussure 1974) that literature students are unlikely to have gained from their previous studies. The third essay appears to derive from Criminology, but again foregrounds an understanding of theory that students will not have gained from their pre-university education. This essay requires students to "support [their]

argument with empirical evidence", almost as if the student has to be reminded that theory without evidence is insufficient. Beginning University students are, one would imagine, more likely to be interested in and aware of criminal evidence than of theory: this rider may indicate therefore the gap between the tutor's concept and the student's.

There is no need to rehearse at length the significance of concepts derived from cultural studies that are inscribed in nearly all these essay titles.

Question 4 (apparently from Literature) expects students to agree a position on writers' views on "consumption" and "wider forms of commodity culture". The discipline from which question 5 arises is uncertain, but the terms "practices" and "spaces" are used in non-commonsense ways and require a conceptual grasp that students may not naturally bring to first year study. Question 6 applies Marxist concepts to literature. Question 7 could have come from a range of disciplines (actually International Relations) and requires an understanding of "modern" that goes beyond the conventional meaning of "up-to-date". Question 8 applies Said's concept of "otherness" again, this time to literature. Question 9 uses the term "representation" in a specialised cultural sense and implies that the student must apply a preconceived feminist concept to the plays studied. Question 10 requires understanding of the difficult term "discursive" and of "agency", again used in a specialised sense. Question 11, probably from Literature, again applies "notions" to history, this time of gender.

Question 12 is perhaps the most allusive. It specifies "psychological research" (but one could imagine a similar question being applied to evidence from literature, history, sociology and a range of other subjects) and focuses on "identity", again used in a specific sense. It implies an epistemology that incorporates by implication many of the cultural notions used in the other essay titles: "representation", "otherness", "construction", "practices" and, perhaps, "absences". It requires the student (of whatever ethnicity) to reflect

on what may be taken for granted. The first problem encountered by a student writing on this subject will be a matter of knowledge: s/he will need to understand the conceptual frameworks that implicitly surround an apparently innocuous question.

Many of the students interviewed for the first focus group study felt that, while they were glad to have transcended the "tick-box", assessment objective-led approach of their A level studies (Hodgson 2010: 29), they would have appreciated more help in orientating themselves to the university study of English. A final year student said that the problem of transition was not the amount of reading required, but "trying to understand what they are looking for and even what you should be reading". A second year student felt that she still didn't know what was expected of an essay. A tutor had told her that a university essay should be different from A level writing about literature: "You don't need to know it in as much depth, you don't need to learn loads of quotes." However, "knowing" the text remained crucial to her sense of competence: "I just thought, if I didn't [know the book in depth], I wouldn't pass the exam." Another second year student said she would have liked to have had "just a general idea of what you are working towards". One student appealed for "a summary lecture at the beginning, so you know what direction you're meant to be heading and where you're aiming for, as opposed to floating along and hoping you'll have an epiphany or something". While some students were excited by literary theory ("the whole poststructuralism thing was huge to me, it opened my eyes," said one), others found it "really difficult". One student said that she had come to understand that the literary-cultural concepts were not really difficult: "It's just the phrasing they used to make it sound really heavy" (Hodgson 2010: 12).

An epistemological approach to student academic literacy, based on an understanding of the conflicting discourses and power relations that students

have to negotiate within the academy, would, we suggest, have two primary features, both of which are concerned with demystification.

Firstly, tutors should be clear about the epistemology of the subject they are teaching. Given the extent to which the philosophy of cultural studies has imbued the humanities and social sciences, a more explicit acknowledgement of key terms and concepts would be enormously helpful to a wide range of students. Lillis (2003: 194) describes the inherent inequalities of a system where what is “right” is implicit rather than “explicit”, assumed rather than taught. One university visited in the first focus group study (Hodgson 2010: 29) offered students an introductory Language module that was, in the words of one, “an eye opening experience”. She had not realised that “so much stuff went into one sentence”. As Snapper (2009: 202) suggests (with reference to English studies), an explanatory focus in the first year on the underlying philosophy of the subject would help students make the changes in their mind-set necessary to understand the discipline in which they are engaged.

Secondly, tutors could develop a pedagogic practice with regard to essay writing that is more effective than the present system of feedback delivered well after the event. The first problem that students encounter when approaching an essay is to know what they want to say: the epistemological approach described above should help them in this regard. Yet subject knowledge is not enough. There are certain generic characteristics of academic writing that transcend disciplines and can be taught. As the student of English Literature and Publishing suggested, even a marketing report has similarities to an academic essay: “I take a theory about social behaviour and apply it to a marketing context” (Hodgson 2011). According to McVey (2008: 289) “all writing is creative writing”, and the “pedestrian world of academic writing and the headier climes of ‘creative’ writing are not so far apart”. Tutors can reflect on their own academic writing in order to help students

develop a thesis, construct an introductory paragraph, interrogate concepts and develop an argument; and to consider, in the age of social networking and multimodal communication, the provision of some alternatives to the academic essay which are congruent with student experience and contemporary society.

This can be achieved, however, only through a change in the writing culture of the academy. Research repeatedly associates student success with an emphasis on formative assessment in the early weeks of the first year (Yorke and Longden 2007). Some participants in the focus groups spoke positively of "practice" essays that they had undertaken during the first year, and of the helpful feedback they had received from their tutors (Hodgson 2010: 28). More frequently, however, students in the focus groups discussed essay writing in terms of its assessment value rather than as a means of learning. Because of importance of these essays in terms of academic credit, several students stated that the solitary writing of these crucial essays was the only part of the course that really mattered (Hodgson 2010: 30). A change in this culture, with more emphasis on low-stakes, collaborative, formative writing, for informal and peer assessment, would surely improve the experience of tutors as well as students. Lillis (2003: 193) explores the "monologic nature of the academic writing that is required from students and the pedagogy in which it is embedded" and calls for "dialogue rather than monologue or dialectic to be at the centre of an academic literacies stance". Nicol (2009) has reported case studies of collaborative writing and peer assessment that appear to scaffold the academic writing of students and provide social support. What we propose in this paper is a cultural pedagogy that gives due emphasis to acculturation within the academy of study but which also promotes a community of learners.

Given the paradigm shift and radical change that faces UK higher education, continued research attention to the practices of the institution and to data drawn from the experience of students is likely to prove the most effective

approach to improving students' academic literacy. It is also the best hope of developing the skills and practices appropriate to a literate and critical society. The arts and humanities need, through the models and modalities of the literacies that they embrace, to make a case for their enduring relevance and impact on contemporary society and culture. We hope in future work to attend in detail to student writing itself (especially by joint honours students), with particular comparative reference to the richness and variety of text and subtext that might be generated and to the cultural pedagogy which will support student development.

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