

University lecturers' constructions of undergraduate writing: a gender analysis

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Background

This project is situated in the context of debates about gender and achievement at university, where men are still proportionately more likely to achieve first class degrees and more likely also to achieve third class degrees (Francis et al, 2001). Women are now obtaining more first degrees overall than men and (if first and upper second results are added together) more 'good' degrees than men, with all subjects being taken together.

A previous study (Francis et al, 2001) found that male history students tended to use more 'very bold' constructions in their essay writing; we suggested that there may be a link between this finding and the tendency for males to achieve proportionally more first class results. However, this study also suggested that essay writing at undergraduate level is a very finely judged performance. Work that is well-rewarded must, it appears, have some bold features, but it must not be *too* bold. It must also demonstrate caution but must not be *too* cautious (Robson et al, 2002). Not surprisingly, interviews with history students revealed a pre-occupation with trying to work out what the lecturer wanted and most students in our sample for our previous study felt they were obliged to play 'a guessing game' (Read et al, 2001).

Purposes and methods

Accordingly, for this ESRC-funded project (number R000239187), attention turned to the lecturers (as those who assess the students' essays) in order to understand their beliefs and perceptions about academic writing. The opinions of 100 history and psychology lecturers were investigated and their views sought concerning the characteristics of 'good' and 'bad' essays in their respective disciplines. These views were analysed and compared according to discipline and gender of respondent. They were also compared with the students' perceptions from the previous study.

In order for the researchers to gain an understanding of the consistency and focus of their assessment practices, lecturers were also asked to mark two

specimen essays prior to their interview. These anonymous essays had been written by final year undergraduate students in the appropriate discipline, one by a female and one by a male student.

Findings

We found a notable diversity in grades awarded to the same essay with only about 50% agreement amongst our respondents. Marks ranged from third class to first class for one essay, and from upper second to fail for another. Male and female lecturers did not appear to differ very much in their marking, in either history or psychology. Where it existed, expertise in the specific topic area did not appear to make a significant difference, nor did the gender of the essay writer.

In fact, a majority of respondents were unable to identify the essay writer's gender correctly and most respondents stated that they did not believe that gender had an impact on essay writing style. Female history lecturers were the exception, however, and most of them believed gender did make a difference to writing, with women being perceived as adopting a style that was less confident and more descriptive, as well as more analytical than that adopted by their male counterparts.

Although the majority of respondents initially stated that they did not believe gender had an impact on students' essay writing, most of them then went on to speculate about ways in which gender *might* actually make a difference. Overall, in their extensive discussion of gender and essay writing, the narratives used by many of the lecturers tended to support a discourse of gender difference, particularly in terms of ability.

Most respondents did believe that gender had an impact on other aspects of undergraduate achievement. The most frequently cited ways in which gender was thought to make a difference were the perceived lack of self-confidence shown by many female students as well as differences in communicative style and approaches to study. Some educational practices (such as some teaching and assessment methods, and the gender imbalance of many university departments) were highlighted as having a negative impact, particularly on the performance of women.

There were some differences in views expressed by the lecturers in each discipline with, for example, twice as many psychology as history lecturers believing women had superior language abilities. Over twice as many women as men in the sample identified confidence as a factor impacting on student performance.

Our findings also indicated a slight tendency for female lecturers to prioritise aspects of presentation and effort in their marking. Male lecturers, on the other hand, were more concerned with argument.

When the findings for the history lecturers in this study were compared with those for the history students in the previous study, we found that 'good' and 'bad' essays were described in broadly similar terms. Both groups stressed the need for originality of thought and wide reading, for example. Lecturers placed more emphasis on grammar and spelling and on structure than did the students, who stressed content more.

Implications

The 50% level of agreement in essay marking would, of course, be improved by moderation procedures. We do not know what the precise impact of moderation would be but our findings highlight the importance of the external examiner role, in particular. To the extent that students in the same or different institutions may be treated differently, there is cause for concern.

The lecturers' view that gender is impacting on the performance of women, in particular, suggests that greater diversity may be needed in relation to teaching and assessment methods; more women in academia might also help female students to feel less marginalised.

The finding that markers may be placing more emphasis on style than content suggests that greater transparency may be needed and more detailed discussion of the framing and interpretation of marking criteria as the basis for assessment decisions. Ideally, discussions would also take place with students about assessment priorities.

More research is needed into the impact of disciplinary differences on assessment and open discussion within institutions about the extent to which these are considered important should be encouraged in appropriate contexts.

Many of our respondents were extremely aware of the impact of gender on performance. We believe it is important that gendered traits in undergraduate writing and achievement are recognised in ways that avoid harmful stereotyping. Staff developers in HE institutions, as well as those working to enhance teaching and learning, have a key role to play in this regard.

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