

# **A chronicle of learning: Voicing the text**

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This document is based to a very large extent on the Ph.D dissertation which I completed at the University of Tilburg in 2013 under the supervision of Professor Jan Blommaert and Professor Sjaak Kroon with Dr Jef van der Aa as assistant supervisor.

My Defence of my dissertation was on 27 May, 2013.

Present in their absence :

Wilfred Somerville Scott. 1890-1979

Thelma Scott, born Nixon, 1906-1985

# Contents

PREFACE	.....
CHAPTER 1	
Introduction: The chronicle of a career	7
PART ONE	
Raising the issues	23
CHAPTER 2	
Reading 'Academic Writing'	24
CHAPTER 3	
Genre-based pedagogy: Problems and possibilities	34
PART TWO	
From transmission to voice	42
CHAPTER 4	
Context as text: a course for student writers in higher education	44
CHAPTER 5	
Cracking the codes anew: Writing about literature in England	68
CHAPTER 6	
Creativity, conformity, and complexity in academic writing: Tensions at the interface	105
CHAPTER 7	
Writing in postgraduate teacher training: A question of identity	114
PART THREE	
Complications	129
CHAPTER 8	
Rethinking feedback: Asymmetry in disguise <sup>1</sup>	131
CHAPTER 9	
Written English, word-processors, and meaning-making	146
CHAPTER 10	
'Error' or ghost text? Reading, ethnopoetics, and knowledge making	163
CHAPTER 11	
Conclusion: Voice as form of attention in reading student writing differently.	180
REFERENCES AND SUMMARY	183

# PREFACE

I have grouped the acknowledgements geographically, beginning with the Netherlands where my supervisors, Professor Jan Blommaert and Professor Sjaak Kroon welcomed me to the Department of Culture Studies, Tilburg University, as a doctoral student. It was there that I found a creative and helpful academic environment and had the opportunity to attend seminars led by Sjaak, Jan and Ad Backus. Jan had earlier been a professor at the Institute of Education in London and I had there begun to discuss with him student writing and the practices and discourses around it. Those early talks and their continuation in Tilburg inform this dissertation. I feel privileged to have been Jan's student. I also consider myself fortunate in having been able to discuss my developing ideas with Dr Jef van der Aa in Tilburg and on his visits to London, and to draw on his knowledge of Tilburg University's doctoral requirements. Thank you, Jef, for your insight and your intellectual generosity. I also particularly appreciated the friendliness and hospitality of Jan Blommaert and Pika Colpaert in Antwerp. My thanks are due, too, to Professor Ad Bachus for offering me space in his home on an early visit and to the Department's Chinese students for arranging accommodation on campus on my later visits. It all helped me to feel supported as I struggled to produce a coherent text. Pika Colpaert's advice and readiness to be skyped or phoned when I was down and the comments she offered on research were helpful in more ways than she probably realises. Others at Tilburg to whom I owe thanks are Carine Zebedee for her work with Jef on the formatting of my text and to Karin Berkhout and Erna van Ballegoy in the departmental office who were always cheerful and helpful.

And now to the United Kingdom. Through the Interuniversity Academic Literacies Research Group based at the Institute of Education and the Language in Higher Education Research Group, based initially at King's College London, I encountered a range of current perspectives on student writing and especially on issues relating to academic literacy/ies. Brian Street and Mary Lea, Carys Jones, Theresa Lillis, Fiona English and Joan Turner, in conversation and through their publications, continue to challenge my thinking and point me in new directions. The conferences organized by Writing development in Higher Education and the European Association for the Teaching of Academic Writing have also been a source of new ways of thinking about writing

Last summer I attended writing retreat at Queen Mary University of London (QMUL), which was run by Sally Mitchell and Kelly Peake. The opportunity

be away from emails and telephone calls and to write in short spells, having had to decide in advance how to spend each short spell, helped me to get closer to a coherent framing of the dissertation as did the opportunity to hear of others' dilemmas and to receive feedback if I wanted it. Thank you Sally and Kelly for the excellently organized and very helpful retreat.

Of my colleagues in the Department of Culture, Communication and Media.(CCM) in the Institute of Education there are four whose thinking has strongly influenced mine. They are Gunther Kress in his development of multimodality as a social semiotic approach and Carey Jewitt (later also Jef Bezemer) for innovative demonstrations, with theoretical implications, of multimodal approaches to 'text' widely conceived. Richard Andrews' writings about writing have also contributed significantly over several years to my developing perspectives.

There are several members of the administrative staff in the former Faculty of Children and Learning and in CCM to whom I owe thanks for their helpfulness and expertise: Kar-Wing Man and, more recently Nwanne Amadi, Rachel Shaw and Eve Wade. An academic colleague from the past whom I wish to include in my thanks is Judy Hemingway. She has been an excellent proofreader who added supportive comments in her emails. But it is to the Head of Faculty Administration, Manjit Benning, that I owe a special word of thanks. I appreciate his professional approach which is coupled with sensitivity to the demands and pressures of academic work and demonstrated in his collegial support of members of the Faculty in that work.

Moving further afield, I have been fortunate to be able to participate in conferences and seminars, and to teach in institutions, outside the United Kingdom. Two US conferences that I have attended a number of times over a period of several years are: 'Conference for College Composition and Communication'(CCCC), Writing Research across Borders (WRAB) and 'Writing across the Curriculum' (WAC). It is at these conferences in particular that I have encountered ideas and reflections which have contributed to my thinking. I can mention only a few of the academics I have heard at the conferences: Chris Anson, Charles Bazerman, John Brereton, Joan Mullin, David Russell, John Trimbur and especially Christiane (Tiane) Donahue whose CCCC workshops (with Cinthia Gannett) on international perspectives have been providing me with new ways of thinking about writing in different national contexts. Tiane's Ph.D: *Écrire à l'université: Analyses comparées en France et aux États-Unis* and her work at the University of Lille led to my involvement,,

together with several UK colleagues, in a project at the University of Lille and to discussions with French colleagues, especially Isabelle Delcambre (Lille) which increased my awareness of the cross-national/transnational complexities of academic writing. The conferences of the European Association for the Teaching of Academic Writing (EATAW) have also introduced me to new ways of thinking. Thank you John Harbord, Lisa Ganobscik-Williams, and now Magnus Gustafsson, for your roles as Chairs committed to EATAW as an organization that considers writing from many perspectives.

The Fiesole Group at the University European University Institute in Florence, led by Nicola Owtram, has links with Humboldt University in Berlin, the University of Sienna, The Central University Institute in Budapest, the London School of Economics, Oxford University, and UPF Barcelona. This group, of which I am a core member, is focusing on what is becoming a central theme in relation to writing in English, i.e. the need for new ways of thinking about writing which give more attention to cross-national differences. Nicola Owtram's thesis, now a book, in which she applied relevance theory to introductions in Italian and English, is one that sticks in my mind.

Finally, I would like in this Preface to go back to South Africa where I began my academic career. I was fortunate, in 2009, to be involved in a Carnegie-funded research project at the University of Cape Town. The book is to be published in 2013 and will bring together voices from the North and the South. Thank you, Lucia Thesen and Linda Cooper for including me. I have known Lucia for a number of years and have always admired – and been envious of – the exceptional sensitivity and subtlety of her thinking and analyses in her discussions of theory, writing and pedagogy. I look forward to reading your further work, Lucia.

The dissertation is grounded in the several dimensions of my own experience in moving across continents. There are two individuals who helped me in my cross-continent mobility. Maxwell Moss in Cape Town helped me to leave emotionally. Gerald Wooster in London helped me to arrive, and to come to feel, in a sense, that I belong.

I know I have omitted many from these acknowledgements. I apologise but I would need a book to do justice to how I have been helped and supported as a student and writer in many different ways down the years. My final word of thanks is, of course, to all the students I have worked with over the years who have generously allowed me to use their written texts as part of my research and have not hesitated to challenge my thinking,

Thank you all of you—academics, administrators, and students.

# CHAPTER 1

## Introduction: The chronicle of a career

As the table of contents indicates, this dissertation mainly comprises a selection of papers which I wrote for publication between 1992 and 2012. However, the primary purpose of the dissertation is to convert that chronological record into a multifaceted and multiscalar *chronicle*, grounded historically in my own process of learning to read student writing differently. In accordance with that aim, I have grouped the published papers under three headings, intended to suggest an on-going process of recontextualisation, and concomitant refocusing, vis-a-vis the concerns which initially informed my reading of student writing. Part One is entitled 'Raising the Issues' and focuses on those initial concerns. Part Two 'From Transmission to Voice', and Part Three 'Complications' represent changes in my perception of what might be involved in reading student texts.

All three parts are concerned with the reading of student writing in English and in the field of Education as a broad area of study with particular reference to my role as a teacher and researcher in a mainly postgraduate college in London, which caters to a markedly international student population. Providing feedback on students' written texts has continuously been part of my professional workload, and the papers collected here reflect on this particular domain.

I write this dissertation towards the end of a long professional career, which began in the late sixties. During this time I have been a student and a teacher, first in South Africa and then in the UK where I have been living and working since the mid-seventies. In South Africa I held academic posts in English Literature, and in the UK academic posts in English in Education. In this introduction I present two historical perspectives in their relevance to that career and especially to my aim of reading students' written texts differently, i.e. voicing the text.

To present the first of the historical perspectives, I construct an outer frame from government-initiated policy changes in higher education in the UK (Section 1.1). In that frame I focus initially on the notion of the written text in English as a linguistic object, and I link that notion to the UK government's neoliberal emphasis on an audit culture and a market economy. Arguing that the market-driven view of text as an explicitly teachable linguistic object makes invisible the increasing, globalisation-linked diversity of Higher Education (HE) institutions in the UK, and their students' histories, I introduce 'voice' as a focus on written text. Voice makes possible a new view of written text. It is the voices that are unheard or silenced that most interest me, and working with international students offered me plenty of opportunity to develop that interest. The papers in this collection focus in different ways on those voices and their importance both pedagogically and theoretically.

Section 1.2 also offers a history but of a different kind – a personal history based on my experience as a learner and teacher. The section is a reflexive biography in which aspects of my own history provide prompts that extend my perspective on voice. I shall focus strongly on the ways in which experiential steps in my journey as a student and a scholar began to translate into insights deriving from encounters with the work of people whom I met or worked with. Section 1.3 will provide a brief overview of the storyline of this dissertation.

## **1.1 History as policy: Written text as a linguistic object in a market economy**

I begin with changes in UK government policy regarding higher education, in which English and academic writing have become commodified as linguistic objects in a market economy. In 1983, the Government introduced full cost fees for 'overseas' students. 'Overseas' students were those who were officially classified by a government Act as 'not citizens of the UK, the Channel Islands or the Isle of Man'. Prior to that, and in my time as a student in the institution in which I now work, 'overseas' students, paid the same fee as 'home' students. After 1983 with the increasing focus, at government and institutional levels, on the 'internationalisation' of education, 'overseas' students from outside the EU were renamed 'international' students while EU students were grouped with UK students as 'home' students who did not pay the full cost fee. These fee differences certainly affected institutions' student



recruitment policies and practices and contributed to the commodification of academic writing in English and with it a view of the written text as a teachable linguistic object.

### 1.1.1 Commodification and the fear of ‘threatened standards’

The financial importance of ‘international’ applicants to UK universities in the 1980s led to the fear, widely aired in the popular press at the time, that universities might ‘lower standards’ in order to generate income, thus damaging the international reputation of UK higher education. The consequence was an increased emphasis on ‘language proficiency’ as a criterion for acceptance on a course. It is here that the British Council played, and continues to play, a leading role. Under the British Council the English Language Testing Service (ELTS), later International English Language Testing Service (IELTS), was introduced to replace the English Proficiency Test Battery (EPTB), a traditional, largely multiple choice test battery used by the British Council from the mid 1960s for the purpose of screening international applicants to UK universities.

The increasing importance of the IELTS tests has led to numerous publications and courses designed in an attempt to ensure student success or to assist the teachers of such courses. Another consequence has been the introduction in almost all UK universities of expensive pre-sessional summer courses for students who had failed to meet the particular university’s required score on IELTS or equivalent (mainly TOEFL) tests. ‘English’, and in particular ‘academic writing’ in English, has become a financially profitable commodity in spite of the lack of construct validity in the tests used to assess it, i.e. the gap between what is tested and scores obtained, and what is actually required on the students’ courses. English testing became a market commodity, and English training (especially in EAP – ‘English for Academic Purposes’, a now respectable branch of applied linguistics) logically followed, leading to a particular ideological view of ‘written text’ useful within that larger commodification framework, i.e. text as a rigidly linguistic (‘correct’) transmittable generic object. Part of the argument in this dissertation will be that this view of text was detrimental to the ‘voice’ of numerous ‘overseas’ students. The fact that this view persists, however, can be gauged from a very recent issue of *Applied Linguistics* (2013) in which two contributions seek to contribute to the improved formalization and measurement of features of academic writing (Gardner & Nesi, 2013; Latif, 2013).

Another policy change that continues to be highly significant for HE institutions, and especially for text as a linguistic, transmittable object is the government emphasis on the ‘widening participation’ in HE of ‘non-traditional’ ‘home’ students. While just who benefits from the widening participation agenda is the subject of debate and controversy, in my institution, as in others, ‘widening participation’ has led to the inclusion of ‘home’ students in in-session academic writing classes. It has also led to a flurry of books that do not focus only on the ‘non-native’ speaker; e.g. the perennial blockbuster status of ‘How to’ books on essay writing; writing in science; writing for publication (e.g. Brause, 2000; Bailey, 2011). In short, in the commodification of academic writing in English, the anticipated ‘customers’ are now *all* students – and their teachers.

IELTS casts its long shadow in such publications and courses. There is a marked emphasis on the use of particular language forms in the construction of a text, which is not dissimilar to the IELTS focus on language functions. Corpus linguistics and the Australian-influenced approach to genres as staged structures have made the linguistic object more explicitly teachable. Offered as a rationale for this ‘textualism’ (Collins & Blot, 2003) is the well-intentioned (or market-driven?) representation of students as needy and as representing a deficit (Lillis & Scott, 2007). I do not mean that what is offered has no value, but in the papers in this collection I seek to suggest that a change of perspective is needed – a change based on a different conception of academic writing.

### 1.1.2 Changing perspectives

The most important change, from my perspective, is that academic writing now needs to be approached as a question of *voice*, not of transmission of skills, and as a *complex object* rather than as a straightforward linguistic-technical one. I would now argue that being an accomplished academic writer – which means, in effect, being *read as such* by others – involves far more than just the acquisition, appropriation and reiteration of specific normative codes, i.e. forms of language that are seen as appropriate to academic writing.

In other words, in my current thinking, the capacity to be read as an academic writer who makes sense, requires the capacity to make oneself understood as a writer through academic texts. But such texts, as papers in this collection seek to show, are obviously constructed out of more than just linguistic forms. They are multimodal objects marked by an outspoken and specific kind of visual and textual aesthetics – what are usually called styles and genres—and which build

on a large collection of materials, from readings of inspiring (or compulsory) texts by other authors, to notes and drafts, emails, conversations and phone calls. Academic texts are obviously highly specialized new *entextualisations* of large amounts of pre-existing different textual materials, and all these materials need to be in place before an adequate new entextualisation can take place (cf. Silverstein & Urban, 1996).

Such materials, however, do not magically appear, and here is another important element of change. At the beginning of my academic career, in South Africa as elsewhere, it was assumed that differences in exam results could be read as individual differences related to intelligence, diligence, persistence, talent and other personal qualities. All of us were seen and treated as ‘native speakers’ of English, and hence also as English-native-speaker writers and readers. The sociology and demography of higher education in institutions such as those in which I worked favoured a view of sharedness. But, in contrast, my background in South-Africa, had in shown me, and many South African, and later UK, colleagues, the range of diversity that students bring with them and the relevance of that diversity as a pedagogical tool, so I could not fail to be apprehensive about the assumed sharedness.

Historically, a good deal of the model-building in formal, descriptive and applied linguistics has prioritized the ‘native speakers of a language’, treating early experience of living in families and stable speech communities as crucial to grammatical competence and coherent discourse. But sociolinguists have long contested this idealization, regarding it as untenable, and globalisation processes have put an end to the assumption of significant degrees of homogeneity in the student and faculty bodies. I have seen my own institution in the UK rather rapidly becoming a provider of educational services for increasing numbers of students from what Braj Kachru (1990) called the ‘expanding circle’ of English in the world:, i.e. people hailing from societies in which English had never been a prominent language and are firmly ‘non-native speakers’ (and writers) of English.

This increasing diversification of the academic environment has changed the parameters of my and colleagues’ work, since we can no longer rely on the massive sharedness of ‘native’ language and literacy competences among our constituency. We have effectively found out that it was a myth which had the negative analytic effects of hiding and dismissing the effective sociolinguistic diversity in front of us, and which Bernstein had early on (and in a hotly contested way) described as a feature of social inequality (Bernstein 1971).

### 1.1.3 Historical bodies and repertoires

It took time for scholarship to adjust to this new sociology and demography, and in fact, this adjustment is far from complete, as I shall seek to show below. But recent work on the sociolinguistics of globalisation emphasises that, rather than focusing on ‘speech communities’ of ‘native’ or ‘non-native speakers’, we should focus on individual *repertoires* of people. The materials mentioned above, the ‘stuff’ required for academic writing in English, do not arrive within someone’s range of skills by accident or at random, and students are not *tabulae rasae* when they enter the institution. To adopt the terminology of Scollon & Scollon (2003), students are *historical bodies*, subjects marked and moulded by life experiences that have taught them how to behave in specific ways in specific settings and have given them the resources to do so. As historical bodies students (like those of us who teach) carry with them personal histories and trajectories of learning and acquisition that have resulted in specific sets of communicative resources which Blommaert calls repertoires. And these repertoires are profoundly influenced by individual biographies:

When someone is six years old, s/he speaks *as* a six-year old. At the age of twelve the age-bound aspects of this pragmatic complex of speech practices has disappeared and has been replaced by another complex; likewise at the age of eighteen, thirty and sixty: with each stage of life we learn the modes of communication of that stage of life, and *we lose part of the modes characterizing earlier stages*; in some cases, features will actually have to be *unlearned* (Blommaert & Backus, 2011: 9)

Repertoires are hard to generalize *a priori*; what is shared and what is unique cannot be presupposed, it should be the outcome of analysis. As Blommaert notes, ‘[i]n scholarship that aspires to a critique of the present system, it would be very unwise to assume universal validity for our ways of life’ (Blommaert, 2005: 36; also Blommaert, 2010). The student’s individual background does matter when it comes to performing academic literacy tasks in English - his or her historical body will take academic literacy practices in specific directions. A scholar’s background is not exempt from this, which is why I need to say more about my own trajectory presently. Assessing student writing is one way of *reading*, and the specific ways in which I have learned how to read do matter in this exercise.

To conclude: this section began with the written text as a linguistic object in the commodification of academic writing in English. That established a context in which the diversity of the linguistic and educational histories of the students I teach and have taught were not viewed positively. Informing all the papers in this collection is my conviction that a different kind of focus is needed – a focus which is at work to a greater or lesser extent in all the papers in this dissertation. However, since what is invisible is easily disregarded (Bazerman, 2003), formal assessment with its implications for learners' careers cannot be swept aside. In the conclusion to the dissertation I will suggest how student writing might be differently 'assessed', that is: *read* differently.

## **1.2 History as biography**

I now move from history as a broadly framing device, mainly at the level of policy, to history as autobiography. I mentioned that I submit this dissertation at the end of a long career, and that it is an intellectual and academic chronicle of that career. I also mentioned that my own practices of writing and reading cannot be overlooked in this exercise. They are, in fact, absolutely central to it.

### **1.2.1 Growing up in South Africa**

I grew up in South Africa, a country where issues of voice, i.e. of the *problematic* nature of voice, define much of its social and political history. I attended an English medium state school for girls in a small town in the Eastern Cape province. I was a day student but a substantial number of the students were boarders. They were either the daughters of local farmers or of British expatriates employed in administrative roles on the copper mines in what was then Northern Rhodesia. The new textile factory on the edge of the town drew in more British expatriates as administrators; they also sent their daughters to the school I attended. In fact, a range of British-English accents was as prominent in the school as South African accents. I cannot recall negative

attitudes to the differences but the Queen’s English and the BBC announcer’s English were presented by our teachers as excellent (but nonetheless unattainable) models for us at the foot of Africa.

What was largely unheard in the school were the languages other than English which a substantial number of students spoke at home. (It was not many years after the end of World War II in which a number of townspeople had fought for Britain and its allies). Several of my fellow students had German surnames and attended the German Lutheran or German Baptist church and also the German classes run by the churches. What was never mentioned in the school was the history behind the presence of the German language in that part of South Africa, namely that German mercenary soldiers had been settled in the area after the Crimean war (A hamlet named Berlin was twelve miles away from the town where I lived and a town called Frankfurt was not much further). There were also in the school a small number of Afrikaans-speaking students whose professional parents believed an English medium schooling would provide their daughters with academic and social capital. While the parents of those of us in the English medium school mostly had white-collar jobs, the parents of the students in the nearby Afrikaans medium school were mainly blue-collar workers. However, in school history lessons we were told that social class did not apply to South Africa; and race as a discriminatory difference was not mentioned.

But what of the majority population in the town and in the country – Black South Africans, known then as the ‘natives’? Their language was not taught in white schools; their history was presented entirely from the perspective of white historians. For example, in descriptions of the frontier wars, as they were later named, the emphasis was on the suffering of the white farmers. And I recall how a primary school teacher referred to the ‘compassion’ of the British Governor of the Cape Colony and of local whites when the Xhosa burnt their crops and destroyed their animals because a young girl had heard voices saying that if they did that a great wind would blow all the whites into the sea. We were never asked to consider why the Xhosa wanted the whites to be blown away.

It is perhaps not at all surprising that South African politics did not enter the classroom. Teachers were at risk of losing their jobs if they touched on anything political. I recall our teacher reading to us a chapter a day of *Cry the Beloved Country* when I was ten. However, though a fierce critic of apartheid outside the school as I learned much later, she drew attention to the feelings in the story and not the political context.

## 1.2.2 Ascribed identities and individual responses

Blommaert (2005) refers to identity as ascribed, as given by others in a dialogical mechanics of attribution and uptake. South Africa certainly ascribed identities to its different peoples. At sixteen, like my classmates, I was issued with an identity card that stated that I was ‘white’. I wonder if that discriminatory identity label explains why I have always shied away from identity in any sense other than as institutionally or politically ascribed, preferring ‘subjectivity’ as a term that can accommodate complexity, and similarly, preferring habitability (Bourdieu, 1977) with its suggestion of choice to *habitus*?

In those early school years we were encouraged to think of ourselves as English in what was then a Commonwealth country. After the Afrikaner nationalist government came to power in 1948, speaking English became an attribute leading to an ascribed identity of ‘not a supporter of the apartheid government’. However, when I came to the UK to follow a course in ‘English as mother tongue’ in the seventies I was unhappy to find that as a white South African I was often assumed by others outside the course I was following to share, or was suspected of sharing, the apartheid Government’s racist views and values. This ran counter to the public emphasis on the explicit cultural value of sharedness, and I found myself arguing, defensively, against an ascribed identity I wanted to reject. This brings me again to voice. Whose voice is heard and how is it heard – and in what actual contexts is it heard or not heard or deliberately silenced or muffled? And what voices do individuals want to be heard? I was confronted with a politics of voice, a highly structured edifice of power in which some voices were heard and many others were not. It took some years before I could turn this early life experience into an intellectual principle..

## 1.2.3 From school to university and to literature

Going to university involved moving from the small town school to the university in a nearby small cathedral city. To gain university entrance I had to study three languages – English as first language; Afrikaans as second language and a third language, which was Latin as the school offered no other, not even German in spite of the German speakers in the school.

At university I followed the three-year BA course majoring in English Literature and in Latin. I then enrolled on the one-year postgraduate degree course in English Literature having decided that literature was and would always be my great love. That was due to the teaching of Guy Butler, the professor

and published poet whose lectures and seminar comments left one wanting to read more of the poet or playwright whom he had so imaginatively presented. This reminds me of another aspect of voice – the voices of others that one hears mentally, even years later, and the many ways in which we carry a baggage of entextualisations, that we can unpack whenever circumstances call for it. I realised (but could not put in words) that reading involved a kind of listening to the voice of the author in a kind of inner dialogue. This motif, which I later understood as a Bakhtinian notion (1981), became essential in my thoughts and practices on writing and reading.

In English Literature at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels the emphasis was on the close study of given texts. An influential work was I.A Richards (1929) *The Practice of Literary Criticism*. Richards had been horrified by the failure of his Cambridge University students to differentiate between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ in a selection of anonymised poems. He warned against ‘stock response’ in the reading of literature. The emphasis on distinguishing the good from the bad by sifting for ‘sense, intention, feeling and tone’ was a feature of literature assignments and examinations in both my undergraduate and postgraduate study of English Literature. The life of a poet or novelist was regarded as irrelevant; and great literature was viewed as a form of secular scripture, which in Richards’ (1929) theorising could bring psychological health by attuning warring mental responses. This was the period when Shakespeare’s plays were studied as ‘dramatic poems’ rather than from a Bradleyian perspective on character. While the narrowness of such a view now seems extraordinary, the close focus on how language was being used with subtlety in the articulation of meaning as feeling or attitude or the articulation of values was, I like to think, a positive and ‘transferable’ aspect of my literature education.

Language was focused on theoretically in Ogden & Richards’ *Meaning of Meaning* (1933) and also in Empson’s *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930). Though we did not study Peirce and semiotics a line might be traced from Ogden & Richards (1933) through Empson (1930) and Peirce (1977) to Kress (1982), for the strong focus on styles (and the resources required for styles) prepared me, I feel, for my encounter with Kress’ work on social semiotics and multimodality many years later (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2002). The readings of Kress’ work that inform papers in this collection have been ‘filtered’, one could say, by my earlier exposure to the minutiae of literary stylistics.



While I always argued as a student that the teaching of Latin put too much emphasis on texts as examples of language structures rather than as literature, there was an activity which is no longer practised but which required attention to the subtleties of style in particular sociopolitical communicative contexts. We were asked to translate English passages into Latin using the style of a particular Latin author; for example to translate a passage of Lord Macaulay's *Lays of Ancient Rome* into Latin in the style of, say, Tacitus or Horace. Heteroglossic writing, we would now call it, was thus part of my Latin training.

My next move was into teacher education at the University of Cape Town where as a part-time student. I obtained a postgraduate teaching certificate and a postgraduate degree in Education, for which I wrote a thesis on the teaching of the Shakespeare play in the secondary school. I interviewed teachers, but only those in white schools because government regulations prevented me from including black or 'coloured' teachers. Not only was the thesis limited by the homogeneity of the interviewees but also by my highly theoretical aim, which was to analyse the teachers' approaches to a Shakespeare play in the light of Shakespearian theory from the UK. Our training, and consequently my approach, was deeply Anglo-centric. This was bound to increase with the next step in my itinerary.

#### 1.2.4 To London

In the 1970s I came to the Institute of Education in London to follow a course in the Department of English as mother tongue. The lecturers in the Department were Nancy Martin, Harold Rosen and Margaret Meek. Although James Britton was then at Goldsmiths, his ideas were still shaping the department's approach to writing (e.g. Britton, 1970). It was in that department that I came to see the narrowness of my earlier focus on 'great literature' and came to view children's and adults' writing as every bit as interesting in ways not always markedly different from great literature. Of particular relevance to the papers in this book was the department's focus on the *learner* in the text. It was here, too, that I encountered what was excluded for political reasons in South African education: sociology, in the form of Basil Bernstein's writings, in particular, and the importance of social mobility in considering the language of learners, and I came to re-interpret my own background, including my attention to literature, through the social and critical lens then provided by Bernstein and his colleagues (see Bernstein, 1971).

In the 1990s Gunther Kress joined the department as professor. He has had an enormous influence on my writing and teaching, and especially on my view of text. We taught an MA module in the Learning and Teaching of English with Literacy. Gunther Kress' approach to 'linguistic processes in sociolinguistic practice' provided a focus on language based on Hallidayan social semiotics (1985), which pointed me to the overemphasis in the Australian genre approach (for example, Knapp & Watkins, 1994) on texts as a narrow range of functions realised by specific language patterns. In classes I would present the genre approach, which was dominant in schools and increasingly so in higher education in the UK, as an approach to be criticised for its neglect of the meanings being made. I drew heavily on Kress' works such as *Texture as Meaning* (1989), *Learning to Write* (1982) and *Early Spelling: Between creativity and conformity* (2000). But it is Kress' development of multimodality (e.g. Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2002) that has most influenced my view of text and informs several papers in this dissertation, as it dramatically expands the scope of 'things to look for' in studying writing practices, and shifts the burden of 'meaning-making' away from just language to a far richer array of resources and practices; i.e. to social semiosis.

This development was part of a broader wave of innovative approaches to literacy in the early 1990s, spurred on by the pioneering critical work of Brian Street (another London colleague), David Barton and other 'New Literacies' scholars (e.g. Street, 1995; Barton, 1994; Collins & Blot, 2003). My work was very much swept up by that wave, as it focused our gaze firmly on the social conditions underlying the production of writing and reading, and I became part of the British 'new literacies' scene, meeting and joining efforts with several of its key affiliates in the UK and abroad, particularly Barry Stierer, Brian Street, Theresa Lillis and Charles Bazerman. The papers collected in this dissertation start in 1992, and mark my first steps into this new and emerging field and their chronological order follows steps in the development of this paradigm.

The next serendipitous event was the appointment of Jan Blommaert as a professor of Languages in Education. I have found his books and journal articles powerfully influential because they have provided a synthesis of much of what preceded – I am thinking here of his *Discourse* (2005), his professorial lecture on *Bernstein and Poetics Revisited* (2008a), and *The Sociolinguistics of globalization* and especially *Grassroots Literacy* (2008b) a book he was working

on while he was at the Institute of Education.. Apart from emphasising the critical potential of the ethnographic gaze, he drew my attention to authors who may not be explicitly present in my work but whose concepts did inspire much of it: e.g. E.P. Thompson's view of culture and history (1994), Raymond Williams' structures of feeling (1977), Dell Hymes' ethnographical concern with the real (1974), and Jonathan Boyarin's ethnography of reading (1993). I found lucid formulations for several key themes in Blommaert's work: the dialogical nature of identity, the connection between linguistic/literacy resources and social positions, the issue of mobility as a theoretically challenging feature of globalization, and the question he had found in Raymond Williams' work: 'what has this form done to this student?' – which is often excluded by 'what is this student doing with this form?'

The students I have taught, and the essays and dissertations and theses of theirs that I have read and discussed with them, inform this dissertation in many ways. Over the years I read thousands of pieces of academic writing done by people from all continents, displaying highly varying levels of familiarity with the normative genres expected in UK academia. While my approaches and views changed perpetually, students' output provided a stable baseline for analysis and reflection. The results are documented in the papers in this dissertation.

### **1.3 This dissertation as research**

Now that the history of the work presented in this dissertation has been sketched, I can turn to that work itself. I offer the reader nine papers, thematically grouped into three parts. Throughout the entire dissertation, I focus on one central issue, an operational as well as a theoretical one: how do we guarantee a fair, constructive and balanced judgment of academic writing performed by a student body which is increasingly diverse, and in which differences are quickly converted into inequalities when considered within a rigid and dogmatic approach to academic writing.

The first part, 'Raising the issues', presents two papers that mark my departure from the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) paradigm. The first paper, 'Reading academic writing' (1992) flags what could be called my 'Bakhtinian moment': the moment when I realized that one must approach writing through the spectre of the reader, and that 'good' or 'bad' writing are evaluative and

dialogical categories, very much in the sense of Bakhtin (1981). I see this paper as the start of a long series of reflections, at once critical and constructive, in which I attempted to come to a broader, more contextualized and socioculturally grounded understanding of academic writing, and in which I understood that my own practices and methods of reading students' writings mattered in considering their achievements.

The critical aspect of this move is documented in the second paper, 'Genre-based pedagogy' (1999), in which I criticize the then-dominant (and still very influential, (see above) paradigm of genre in EAP teaching and training. While I rejected the formal and closed notion of genre offered in much important work of that era, I wanted to avoid throwing away the child with the bathwater. There are other and more productive ways of approaching genre, i.e. as an emergent and context-sensitive category which only occurs 'by degree' in actual reality (cf. Blommaert's discussion of Fabian in Blommaert, 2008b: 42-73). I found out about several more productive approaches much later but in this paper the inspiration of Kress' take on genre is manifest.

The second part of the dissertation is entitled 'From transmission to voice', and it documents my journey away from a transmission-based pedagogy to one focused on issues of voice. In each of the four papers presented in this part, I attempt to bring something new into the canons of teaching and training academic writing at that time. Thus, the first paper 'Context as text' (2004) emphasizes the situated nature of academic writing practices, and the way in which context-sensitive assessment can be more productive than assessments focusing overly on formal 'correctness' and reiteration of normative structures of text. While evident, even seemingly trivial now, the case for attending to context had to be quite closely argued back then. And judging from some recent work (e.g. Gardner & Nesi, 2013) the battle has not yet been decisively won.

I extend that line of argument in the second paper, 'Cracking the codes anew' (2002), where I turn to literature. When students 'migrate' from secondary to higher education, they encounter entirely different modes of operations and sets of expectations, the difficulties of which need to be seen against the background of the actual contexts in which students move. It can then be seen that the field of 'literature' with all its associated practices and knowledge forms is in itself dependent on the layers of the education system. Society, in other words, defines what literature is to students of different ages.

The third paper, 'Creativity, conformity and complexity in academic writing' (2004) takes on board some key insights from the work of Gunther Kress. In 'Texture as meaning', Kress (1989) showed how someone who had violated the rules of grammar still received a higher mark than others who had produced grammatically correct prose. This idea prompted a set of reflections on the space in which writers actually have to seek effect by exploiting the margins of the formal system, even when such a system, as in the case of academic writing, appears exceedingly rigid. The fourth paper, then, 'Writing in postgraduate teacher training: A question of identity' (2000), engages with the ways in which academic writing should be seen as an act of identity, in which the author's voice assumes a position in relation to readers. In this paper, the journey from transmission to voice comes full circle, and I could see at the time a broad range of new possibilities for teaching academic writing.

In the third part of the dissertation, 'Complications' I engage with specific aspects of voice in relation to academic writing practices. The first issue, in the paper 'Rethinking feedback' (2003), is power and inequality, and its source of inspiration is Basil Bernstein. While feedback is ostensibly a supportive procedure, it is predicated on a huge asymmetry between the tutor and the student. Since power is a crucial element of any context in which we communicate, it does not remain absent from feedback practices and so I began to understand how feedback can be a learning occasion and mode when there is an awareness of the asymmetries that are inscribed in the very procedure.

The second paper may seem hopelessly dated now. Yet, 'Written English, word-processors, and meaning-making' (2001) documents a seismic shift in the infrastructures of academic writing, caused by the generalized use of computers with word-processing faculties that include spell-checkers, translation tools and dictionaries. Remarkably, relatively little academic attention was given to the effects of the use of PCs in academic writing research. For example, it was not until the inception of the *Journal of Writing Research* (2008) that some room for qualitative writing studies emerged involving higher education and word processing. Yet, this shift in infrastructure, I argue, has a powerful effect on voice, and an even more powerful one on the actual organisation of academic writing as a set of practices as well as a requirement for academic success. It also sheds a new light on how students could or could not still 'hear' their own voice, when it was spelled out so clearly for them on the screen.

The final paper in this dissertation, ‘Error? Or ghost-text?’ (2012) explores Hymesian ethnopoetics as a useful tool for unearthing the various resources that people actually deploy in communication. It was Hymes (1996) who powerfully argued that attention to voice, rather than to ‘language’ in the restricted sense of the term, can enable very different, richer, forms of subjectivity. In other words if we shift our gaze away from grammar and propositional semantics and take into account the entire range of skills and forms of competence displayed in any kind of interaction, we create a much broader field of assessment in which we can see students make sense, and powerfully so, even with what appears to be ‘limited’ linguistic skills.

## 1.4 Conclusion

This is the general storyline of this dissertation. It offers the chronicle of my own practices of working in the field of academic writing with students from all over the world, and it focuses on how these practices developed and changed over the years, due to influences I have described above. I will provide short but more detailed introductory notes at the beginning of each of the three parts in the dissertation, and in the concluding chapter I shall return to the most important and critical turns documented here.

I can, in all likelihood, not claim that the journey I describe here is a unique one. I know that many scholars of my generation have passed through similar stages of academic reflection, sometimes revolutionary but most often not overly dramatic, just part of what we call ‘experience’.

Experience is an important repository of knowledge. Yet, we have very few ways of thematising and narrating it as such. A reflexive chronicle, such as this one, represents best to me the experience I have gathered, and may be the best way of communicating it to others. I am aware of the difficulties and limitations contained in this attempt. In her widely acclaimed *The Golden Notebook* (1962), Doris Lessing documents the way in which a woman records several voices – of herself and others – and tries to compile these voices into one huge notebook. It is a struggle with very uncertain outcomes. This image, however, captures what I have been trying to achieve in this dissertation, while it simultaneously captures its central themes and topics: the plurality of very different voices we encounter in our lives and teaching careers, and our attempts to squeeze them into a format – our own golden notebook.

# PART ONE

## Raising the issues

Helping students from a diversity of backgrounds achieve academically is an issue that is common to all the chapters in this dissertation but in each paper I seek a different lens on the issue, modulating my position in the light of research or literature I have encountered in the course of time.

A primary prompt may be my professional responsibility for a new course or group of students. That was the stimulus for the first chapter *Reading 'Academic Writing'*. Drawing on Victor Turner's rites of passage in their connection to liminality, I seek to suggest some of the complexity that may be hidden within the conventional image of education as a clearly defined journey of one kind or another. The academics, from whose publications I construct rites of passage narratives, represent a diversity in their views of what is important for student success – a diversity that reflects different academic backgrounds and experiences.

The second chapter, *Genre-based pedagogy: Problems and possibilities*, introduces the students, primarily in terms of the different resources which they might bring to their writing. The main purpose of the chapter can perhaps be summarised as seeking to suggest a way between a focus on 'text' as a primarily linguistic object and genre as just one resource in a student writer's repertoire. Pedagogically, genre then becomes just one of the resources that students need to express and communicate meaning.

These chapters are based on:

Scott, M.

1992 Reading 'Academic Writing'. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 17(1), Article 1.

Scott, M. & N. Groom

1999 Genre-based pedagogy: Problems and possibilities. In P. Thompson (ed.), *Issues in EAP writing research and instruction*. CALS: University of Reading, ??-??.

## CHAPTER 2

### Reading 'Academic Writing'

It could be any day of the week from Monday to Friday at the Institute of Education. The group of students attending the seminar might represent any one of the courses that the Institute offers within any one of its departments. The seminar would appear on each student's personal timetable as 'study skills'. If asked to define 'study skills', I, the tutor, would give a catch-all answer: 'study skills' is anything that might help students 'learn how to learn' (Novak & Gowin, 1984).

Helping students 'learn how to learn' is now a concern of most UK institutions of higher education including those responsible for teacher education. Special programmes of seminars, workshops and tutorials are provided across the UK throughout the calendar year. The 'study skill' given most emphasis in such programmes is 'academic writing', no doubt because it is on the quality of their written assignments or dissertations that students' success or failure largely turns.

Here at the Institute of Education, I, too, give most of the time available to 'academic writing'. My approach is pragmatic: anything that works, i.e. helps students to do better in the judgement of their main-course tutors, is worth doing. Students bring with them a diversity of difficulties which call for a range of responses. However, in conformity with current emphases on 'awareness' (Gibbs, 1981; Fairclough, 1989) as important in one way or another to an improvement in student performance, I frequently refer students to published research into academic writing and sometimes make a research paper the topic for discussion in a seminar.

In my experience, students respond with most interest and enthusiasm to papers that report investigations into student difficulties that they can identify with. 'It's good when you can find yourself in a paper, and it's even better when there is a happy ending' is a typical response.



'Find yourself'... 'a happy ending.' That is the kind of discourse I associate with responses to fiction rather than the academic paper, especially papers which are not individual case studies as most of the ones I use are not. Discussions with students have revealed that while they read – extracting the arguments, the results and conclusions – they also respond on another level: they approach the papers as possible blueprints for their own emerging biographies. Moreover, it is the extent to which a paper reflects the students' sense of their situation as students, within the particular context of the Institute of Education, and not the strength or weakness of the 'grounds' and 'warrant' of the researcher's 'claim' (Toulmin, Rieke & Janik, 1984), that tends to determine whether or not they adopt its recommendations. There are thus often considerable differences in students' assessments of the value to them of particular papers. Nonetheless, in my experience there has usually been a broad consensus as to the kind of student biography each paper implies.

My more formal investigation of the individual histories that students bring to texts about student difficulties and of the particular biographies that they hope to write is still in its early stage. In this paper I shall, therefore, concentrate instead on the new perception of texts about students' problems in relation to academic writing that my students' responses have pointed me towards. It is a perception that does, however, have implications for helping students 'learn to learn' as I shall briefly indicate in the final part of the paper.

My starting point is in fiction, in my reading of Doris Lessing's (1989 [1962]) novel, *The Golden Notebook*. It is a cornucopia of a book which can support many different interpretations to suit different purposes. In this paper I shall read it as a metatext, a text about text. Anna, the central character, is a writer living in a particular place at a particular point in time, viz. London in the fifties. It is Anna's ambition to weave a verbal net that will lift essential meanings from the stream of lived events that constitute her experience but totality and absolute significance, the corollaries of the essential, constantly elude the mesh of her narrative. Anna marks her failures by interrupting her attempts at writing with sudden transitions, abrupt endings, or critical observations that represent her hard won perception of her misperceptions about writing: there are no essential meanings to be captured in words, nor can the writer achieve transcendence. She is entrapped in history and that condition translated into experience means inhabiting a tower of Babel where the discourses of the times offer the writer (and the reader) conflicting and

merging identities. She can make choices but they will inevitably be shaped by her history and by what time and the place make pertinent or possible. Thus, however hard she tries to be 'objective', she can only fail. She cannot transcend her subjectivity.

What my students' needs had led them intuitively to perceive was that it is not only fiction that cannot be 'objective' in an obsolete sense. They had found the researcher's subjectivity: the individual views of what 'student' means which were contained within the frame of the conventional research format. The students' intuitive perceptions and Doris Lessing's emphasis on the text as involved in the particular meanings of time and place find their parallels and extensions in Bakhtin's theory of language. Like Lessing, Bakhtin (1984 [1929]) moves the focus of attention away from essence and onto social reality. He insists that the word cannot be abstracted from its living, historical context:

The life of the word is contained in its transfer from one mouth to another, from one context to another context, from one social collective to another, from one generation to another generation. In this process, the word does not forget its own path and completely free itself from the power of those concrete contexts into which it has entered.

It is consistent with the above representation of words as 'abbreviations for past context' that Bakhtin should liken all language to speech: words carry voices that speak the history of the words' uses and interpretations: 'there are no voiceless words.' Words in combination, i.e., text – or to use Bakhtin's speech-analogous term, 'utterance' – constitute a 'definite socio-historical at' that constructs a 'dialogue' between the voices of the words' many contexts.

The 'dialogic' text is a key concept in Bakhtin's writings. What it has drawn my attention to is the inevitable presence in any text of ambiguity, contradiction and silence: the writer tries to construct a unitary meaning but the multivocal nature of words defeats the attempt at monologue. Every text cannot but speak to, hear and understand other meanings deriving from the words' past contexts. Bakhtin's position is superficially similar to Derrida's rejection of 'logocentrism'. However, Derrida's a-historical focus implies regret at the impossibility of meaning being fully present in words whereas Bakhtin views absences as a corollary of the dialogic text that speaks finally of concrete contexts.

Lessing and Bakhtin together make it possible for me to explicate and develop my students' untheorised intuitions regarding the meanings in research

papers in the following way: texts inevitably represent transformations of the material world they refer to into meanings that are both individual and social since the writer's choice of words is that the selection from the meanings 'out there' which his or her individual history and situation make possible and pertinent. Words are, however, as Musil (1984 [1930]) put it, a 'most disorderly company'; there meanings trail other meanings associated with other contexts. The writer's selection of meanings echoes, silences or creates discords out of those which aim at academic objectivity, are polyphonic, consisting in texts within texts, and are embedded in actual contexts which enter into their meanings.

My students approached research papers as texts that offered them conceptions of what it means to be a 'student'. In the next part of this paper I shall attempt to show how research papers can support such readings when they are viewed as transformations of actual situations. To place academic texts in that perspective is to blur the distinction between them and fiction; neither kind of text can evade the writer's subjectivity. However, as Lessing and Bakhtin have helped me to perceive, subjectivity is not a matter of the unique individual point of view but also with the contradictions or silences or ambiguities in them that suggest a glossing over a problematic aspects in the actual context in which the writer-researchers produce their research and writing.

The three texts that I have selected represent three distinctive approaches within the literature about 'academic writing'; the first derives its perspective from linguistics; the second draws on linguistics to some extent but far more on cognitive psychology; the third text illustrates the emphasis on language and power which has recently emerged out of sociolinguistics. The three texts are:

- Bloor, M. & Bloor, T., 1991, *Cultural Expectations and Socio-Pragmatic Failure in Academic Writing*;
- Hounsell, D., 1987, *Essay Writing and the Quality of Feedback*;
- Ivanic, R. & Simpson, J., 1992, *Who's Who in Academic Writing?*.

As I am using the texts to illustrate a focus which readers can test out for themselves on other texts, it should not matter if the texts that I have chosen are unfamiliar to readers. The following brief synopses of the overt frames are simply intended to indicate the outer frames within which the texts offer their versions of what it means to be a student.

Bloor & Bloor write about the difficulties of overseas postgraduate students. On the basis of data from questionnaires, interviews and analyses of students' academic writing they ascribe the students' problems to their misperceptions of the norms of academic communities in UK universities; misperceptions which Bloor & Bloor claim derive from the students' assumptions that the UK norms are the same as the ones in the academic cultures they come from.

Hounsell places the source of undergraduate home students' problems in relation to essay-writing in their 'non-interpretive' conceptions of what they need to do in an essay. He also ascribes the students' difficulties to the failure of their tutor's feedback to bridge the gulf between the students' cognitive representations and the conception they need of essay writing as 'disciplined meaning-making'.

Ivanic, a tutor, and Simpson, a mature undergraduate, trace Simpson's problems to the norms of academic discourse which they characterise as representing a detached voice of authority that excludes the writer's personal identity. They examine the cast of authority figures (e.g. writers of the books Simpson consulted) that are present in a selection of Simpson's essays and note where he has managed to include himself. They argue that all students need to be encouraged to decide what kind of 'You' they want to be in their essays.

Despite the differences in their theoretical perspectives and core concepts the papers are strikingly similar in one respect. They contain elements which, borrowing from Hodge (1990), I shall term 'mimetic' in that they overtly refer to extra text events and situations – in this instance, to student problems, researchers' interventions and anticipated outcomes. The relation between such mimetic elements can be described as syntagmatic i.e. as a relation in time and space. The partner of the syntagm is the paradigm. I would suggest, though, that 'associative' is more effective than 'paradigmatic' in epitomising the polyphony of voices which marks the transformation of the mimetic elements into the ambiguities, and silences of the dialogic text; a process that is analogous to that which the psychoanalyst witnesses when the patient articulates the multivocal associations attached to childhood events. In other words, when placed within a Bakhtinian framework 'transformations' defeat system, and interpretations are constrained instead by judgements concerning the relevance of the particular memories of other contexts that words carry for the reader.

In the texts that are the subject of this paper the mimetic elements together constitute syntagms relating to the general situation and trajectory of the student

vis-a-vis the socioeconomic structure: to be a student is to be in a state of transition between recognised positions in that structure. By associative logic 'student' can thus connote a 'rite de passage' while metaphoric elaboration can transform 'rite de passage' into a 'death' that should result in a 'birth' after a prescribed period of time spent in preordained ways.

Anthropology can provide us with amplifications of the 'prescribed period'. Turner's (1974) description of the state of the 'passengers' as 'liminal' is particularly relevant since liminality epitomises the multivocal. On crossing the limen (threshold):

The state of the laminar passenger becomes ambiguous, betwixt and between fixed points of classification.

Turner can also offer us the association of 'liminality' with equalitarian, undifferentiated, I – thou relationships ('communitas') which represent the rejection of the norms attached to recognised roles in the social structure.

The anthropological contexts that are evoked by 'rite de passage' provide a sharper focus for a reading of the texts by Bloor & Bloor, Hounsell, and Ivanic & Simpson. That reading rests on two questions. The first question is: How does each writer view the final destination of the 'passengers'? The second question is related to the first. It is: How do the writers represent the 'passage'?

To enter the texts via those questions, however, is to be drawn into 'possible worlds' (Bruner, 1986). Each text 'invents the university' (Bartholomae, 1985) in an individual way in that each transforms its mimetic elements into conceptions of the ideal academic journey and destination. Viewed in that light, the mimetic elements – the references to actual situations, procedures and findings – acquire a new appearance and significance. As with those ambiguous figures in textbooks on perception, where the eye can perceive only one form at any one time, their shape changes from 'warrant and ground' (Toulmin *et al.*, 1984) of the writers' arguments to elements in a narrative plot.

The plots are reminiscent of the folktale in their generality, the students and their problems are presented as representative, the procedures or actions are conventional and the resolutions take the form of generalisations. However, whereas folktales usually have happy endings denoting an achieved state, the three texts under examination offer anticipated or wished for elements are most markedly transformed into conceptions of the university vis-a-vis the social structure.

Of the three papers it is only that by Bloor & Bloor which identifies the wished for university with the esoteric. Bloor & Bloor state that the most favourable outcome for the overseas student is 'participation in the international academic community.' Their use of the word 'community' does not, however, denote an endorsement of 'communitas' or 'liminality'. It points contradictorily to knowledge and use of the norms and registers of the academic discourses of UK universities which Bloor & Bloor would have overseas students 'master'.

Hounsell, on the other hand, does not restrict the outcome of the students' 'passage' to the acquisition of specialised academic competence. He refers to the moral and intellectual revolution described by Perry. In Perry's account of the student's academic journey the ideal destination is a recognition of the speculative, provisional nature of knowledge that does not, however, exclude commitment to a set of beliefs or theories. Unlike Bloor & Bloor, Hounsell thus overtly attaches value to the tentativeness and ambiguity of liminality. However, as I shall show shortly there are contradictory elements in his text.

While Hounsell offers us a version of the wished for outcome that gives the norms of the university a relevance in the world outside its walls, Ivanic & Simpson propose resistance to such norms since they regard them as destructive of the 'real person', the 'YOU' that is important. However, like Hounsell's, their text contains contradictions which I shall comment on shortly.

The three texts' representations of the 'passage' are closely linked to their particular inventions of the university. The relation is primarily that of means to end. Bloor & Bloor thus represent the 'passage' as an initiation into the cultural do's and don'ts of the discourse communities in UK universities. The responsibility for that initiation is, however, placed firmly on the students' shoulders. The text abounds in the vocabulary of duty and obligation: should, should not, must, must not. Students have, as it were, to acquire good academic manners in order to be accepted as members of the university.

Hounsell, by contrast, reserves the do's and don'ts for tutors. Those students who hold non-interpretive conceptions of the essay writing task need tutors who can enter into a dialogue with them on the students' terms. Hounsell also suggests that the helpful tutor will convert essay writing from a solitary to a pedagogical activity. In short, Hounsell would appear to be recommending a movement in the direction of 'communitas'.

In Ivanic & Simpson's paper the 'passage' takes the form of a 'social drama' which is Turner's (1974) term for social situations that involve conflicts

concerning status. The student, John, who stands eventually for all students' needs is locked in a conflict between an 'Ego-I' which represents the university's norms of impersonality and objectivity and a 'Committed-I' which denotes a real self with personal convictions. The university and its discourses are thus sites of struggle as words in the text such as 'power', 'control' and 'resist' indicate.

The rite of passage narratives that have emerged from the three texts all point to transformations of the rite of passage syntagm as the typifying feature of the educational text. The rite of passage matches Moore's (1974) criterion. He characterises educational theory as prescriptive not descriptive; in other words, the educational text explicitly or implicitly proposes outcomes involving change both individual and collective. The differences between the narratives I have outlined above can thus be represented in terms of the texts' conceptions of education. The emphasis in Bloor & Bloor's text on the acquisition of esoteric knowledge can then be seen to imply a view of education as initiation. Hounsell, on the other hand, conceives of the educated person as education's *raison d'être*, while Ivanic & Simpson subscribe to a humanistic, person centred conception in which education consists in resisting education's conventional expressions of authority.

Up to this point my reading of the texts has concentrated on presenting each of them as coherent and unified in their transformations of the actual situations they refer to. There are, however, ambiguities, contradictions and silences which take us right out of the texts and into questions about the writer-researchers' and students' actual contexts in the university.

Bloor & Bloor, who recommended that overseas students strive to be assimilated into the UK culture, recognise that they can be accused of encouraging student alienation and mental distress. Their counter argument is that the distress caused by being outsiders in the academic community is greater by far. Bloor & Bloor use the language and metaphors of social interaction, for example, 'face threatening activities' and 'conform to the social rules of the academic community.' Perhaps we should not be so harsh on them? What realities have been omitted from Bloor & Bloor's text? Perhaps their stance is based on their observations of the treatment of outsiders in UK universities? Perhaps we should regard their recommendations as possible pointers to larger issues?

Hounsell's paper and also Ivanic's, as I have indicated, contain contradictions. The contradictions centre in the question of authority. Hounsell recommends 'dialogue' between tutors and students and a relativistic approach to knowledge. Yet there is an implicit and marked symmetry between tutor and student in his text. The tutor is presented as an authority on essay writing. Students are thus pupils like those in the Socratic academy: they must be led towards the competences that the tutor already has. Furthermore, in analysing his data Hounsell places students' responses in dualistic categories, so editing out the ambiguities and nuances. The following comment, for example, which surely hints at a conception of 'student' shaped by a personal history and carrying strong emotional overtones, is dismissed as 'literalistic': 'I gathered the tutor wanted me to argue but I mean ... I wasn't going to get aggressive in an essay.'

In keeping with their plea for the presence of a 'real self' in academic texts, Ivanic & Simpson refer to themselves as 'Roz' and 'John' or 'we'. They choose words suggesting a personal position or conviction as often as possible: believe, think, emphasise. Finally, though, they cannot avoid the voice of assertion and the claim to 'awareness'. As academic writers they are required to make a 'claim'. However, the 'claim' is ultimately in Ivanic's voice since it is she who, as we are explicitly told, provides the theory. No less than Hounsell, or even Bloor & Bloor who implicitly endorse its authority, she finally represents the university as it is and not as wishing would have it.

I stated earlier that noting the ambiguities and contradictions in the texts would point to aspects of the 'real' world that had been glossed over because they were problematic. The writer-researchers offer student readers neat, coherent blueprints of what it means to be a student, but, by omission and contradiction, the texts finally 'speak' with other voices. Bloor & Bloor's text raises the question of how the student outsider is generally perceived; Hounsell's paper, and also Ivanic's, points us toward the real constraints on 'liminality' and 'communitas' in the actual setting of the university.

In finally taking me back to the 'real' context in which I work, my analysis of the three texts has reminded me of the large and difficult issues to do with authority, prejudice, belonging and identity which I can keep hidden behind fine rhetoric but which may be as important to my student's learning to learn as their acquisition of specific 'study skills'. I am left with the realization that in offering students a conception of 'academic writing' I am presenting them with the



meanings I attach to 'student'. Furthermore, my impulse towards a unified 'text' may produce transformations that edit out dilemmas and complexities in the lived social reality. It could also lead me to ignore the diverse histories formed in diverse social contexts which give words the particular 'voices' that my students hear. I cannot finally simply hand students the meanings that I associate with 'student', and more than they can hand me theirs, but in that understanding may lie the beginning of our hearing one another.

My starting point was in fiction and so is my conclusion. I shall leave the last word to Doris Lessing. *The Golden Notebook* has an outer frame in the form of the conventional novel with its over-determined patterns of meaning. Doris Lessing tells us in an introductory preface that *The Golden Notebook* breaks that form; it points to 'all that complexity' that the outer novel omits. In this paper I have tried to indicate some of the complexity which 'academic writing' can edit out.

## CHAPTER 3

# Genre-based pedagogy: Problems and possibilities

### 3.1 Introduction

In his as yet unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Peter Knapp (1997: 111) refers to the trouble with 'genre', so drawing an analogy between 'genre' and the corpse in Hitchcock's film *The Trouble with Harry* (1957). The analogy is based in the fact that, like Harry's corpse, 'genre' continues to present problems. Knapp ascribes these problems to the complexity of genre theory – a complexity to which leading linguistic, semiotic, rhetorical and educational theorists have all contributed; for example, Freedman (1987), Martin (1989), Rothery (1987), Kress (1989b, 1994), and Cope & Kalantzis (1994) in Australia, and Bazerman (1989), Swales (1990), Miller (1994) and Freedman & Medway (1994) in North America. Knapp (1997), however, resists the reduction of this complexity to the distinction which Freedman (1994) makes between a 'Sydney school' and a 'North American school'. In arguing against this distinction Knapp points to the considerable diversity within each 'school', a diversity evident in two publications which, in attempting to represent 'their school', have each made visible the tensions which characterize it. Those publications, which now have a wide readership, are: Cope & Kalantzis (1993), *The Power of Literacy*, and Freedman & Medway (1994), *Genre and the New Rhetoric*.

Nevertheless, as Knapp also points out, it is possible to identify within this theoretical diversity a generally held view that texts are classifiable on the basis of predictable linguistic forms, structures of organization, and purposes. Our own experience as tutors, and that of colleagues in some other institutions, would seem to indicate that this position now has echoes, and modulations of meaning an import, within UK universities. Partly, in response, no doubt, to the presence of large numbers of 'international' students whose first language is not

English, course tutors are currently being encouraged to offer explicit advice on essay and dissertation writing advice which is assumed to be the means of enhancing the students' chances of success. Consequently, some course tutors are now showing an interest in genre theory and are seeking guidance on its application in the university classroom. Though the numbers of such tutors may all be too few as yet, it seems timely to focus on the possible benefits and limitations which genre theory offers when it is converted into practice. Within the context of this brief paper this cannot be the subject of a full discussion. Instead, we offer examples from our own experiences as tutors; examples based on the approach recommended in Swales & Feak (1994) *Academic Writing for Graduate Students: A course for nonnative speakers of English*. Our aim is primarily to raise questions and suggest possibilities rather than to offer answers. It is, however, central to our purpose to suggest that genre-based pedagogy, as illustrated in Swales & Feak (1994), represents a narrowing of theoretical focus which we would question even while recognizing its potential value.

### **3.2 Possible benefits of GBP**

We begin by speculating about the reasons why EAP tutors might, and in our experience do, welcome GBP. Our observations are as follows. First, at a curricular level, GBP may be seen as offering a principled 'middle way' between the pokes of skills-based, 'general' EAP (e.g. Hutchinson & Waters, 1987) on the one hand, which – fatally, in our view – dismisses instructional content as an irrelevance, and content-based approaches on the other, which rest on somewhat questionable theoretical foundations (see Swales, 1995), and which in any case require material resources and levels of institutional support that are simply not available to many, if not most, academic literacy practitioners. Second, at the classroom level, many tutors find that GBP gives them 'ways into' the otherwise impenetrably arcane texts of the various disciplines of their students, while students respond to the fact that it treats them as intelligent, academically-oriented adults, uses 'authentic' texts, and provides insights for both reading and writing, thus treating the production and interpretation of text as organically related, rather than as distinct and disconnected skills. Finally, although measuring the effectiveness of any writing pedagogy is a highly problematic undertaking, the limited research evidence that is available (see Hyon, 1996 for a review) appears to confirm the subjective

observations of many practitioners, that GBP 'seem to work'. Consider, by way of illustration, the following student essay:

### **Text 1: Privatization in developing countries**

Developing countries have been privatizing their state-owned enterprises (SOEs) during the last two decades for many reasons: a large number had been economically inefficient, suffering financial losses and using an excessive amount of domestic credit. In recent years, a debate surrounding privatization in developing countries has arisen, because privatization was conceived as a means of stimulating economic development and reducing poverty, under the philosophy of the primacy of the private sector in the provision of goods and services. However, this assumption has not been valid in many developing countries; on the contrary, it has failed to meet expectations in many cases.

The main purpose of this essay is to examine the different experiences and performance of developing countries in the course of their drive towards privatization and therefore conclude which is the best course to follow. The criteria that will be used to examine privatization in developing countries are the improvement of efficiency (on the assumption that the production of goods and services is more efficient under the management of private sector), distribution of income, distribution of wealth, adjustments to cyclical fluctuations (short term) and structural adjustments (long term).

This paper begins with a simple definition of privatization. This is followed by a summary of the history and statistics of privatization. The third section is a review of the economic theory relevant to the privatizations debate. The fourth section presents arguments for and against privatization in developing countries, and the final section gives some recommendations for developing countries.

This text corresponds fairly closely to Swales' oft-cited CARS (Creating a Research Space) model for research paper introductions. In fact this model had been presented to the preessional class of which this student was a member and the student had found is a flexible and useful tool for achieving his own purposes as the writer of an economics essay. This becomes clearer when the student's introduction is set against the moves of the CARS model. Those moves are set out in Swales & Feak (1994: 1975) as follows:

Move 1 – Establishing a research territory:

- a by showing the general research area is important, central, interesting, problematic or relevant in some way (optional) B;

- b by introducing and reviewing items of previous research (obligatory).

Move 2 – Establishing a niche:

- a by indicating a gap in the previous research, raising a question about it, by extending previous knowledge in some way (obligatory).

Move 3 – Occupying the niche:

- a by outlining purposes or stating the nature of the present research (obligatory);
- b by announcing principal findings (optional);
- c by indicating the structure of the RP [research paper] (optional).

The first paragraph of the introduction to the student's essay represents his adaptation of Moves 1 and 2. While the student does not refer specifically to previous research, he does indicate that he is concerned with an important but problematic area, viz., privatization, about which there are competing assumptions in the field of economics; he thus implies that there are questions which need to be asked as to why these assumptions have not proved to be valid in many developing countries. While Paragraph 1 uses the CARS model flexibility, Paragraphs 2 and 3, on the other hand, clearly conform to Move 3 (occupying the niche): the student outlines his purpose, viz., 'to examine the different experiences and performance of developing countries in the course of their drive towards privatization...', and then spells out the structure of his essay.

Consider, however, a less successful essay introduction, written by another member of the same preessional class:

### **Text 2: Soil**

It is said that the first civilizations flourished near big rivers. One of them flourished in the area between the Tigris and the Euphrates. This area was a fertile crescent where the soil was very fertile. It maybe shows the importance of soil to humans. Our ancestors decided to live the stable life and began to cultivate land instead of gathering and hunting, then the civilization developed. Even now in the 20th century we cannot live without cultivation, although some bio-methods have been developed. More and more people have begun to recognize water pollution and other environmental problems, but we hardly pay attention to soil. How many of you know about soil? I myself do not know about it at all. Therefore I would like to know about the significance of soil.

The student writer of this introduction had also been introduced to the move-structure of the CARS model, and has attempted to use it in her text; but here the effect is only to keep the reader guessing as to what the paper is about until the last sentence.

What, then, does this example tell us about the limits of GBP? We want briefly to consider this question before suggesting an alternative approach which is based on a refocusing of genre theory and so of GBP. This will involve returning to the two examples of student writing which are quoted above and looking at them from a different perspective.

### 3.3 Problematising GBP

We will start by dismissing 'local' explanations of the student's problem before moving on to consider a more general observation that might be made. We have suggested that the 'Soil' text, and the experiences of its author, have something to teach us about what we have termed 'the limits of GBP'. Before considering what this might be, however, it will first be necessary to address a number of 'commonsense' objections. The most obvious of these, that the teacher was incompetent, can easily be disregarded, as it does not account for the text produced by the more 'successful' economics student. Explanations focusing on possible linguistic or cognitive shortcomings on the part of the student are also easily dismissed: as members of the same group, both the 'privatisation' and the 'soil' writers had been assessed as having essentially the same English language proficiency and needs (and had the same entry-level IELTS score); furthermore, both were bright and articulate students. These factors have led us to argue that the difference in the students' ability to make productive use of Swales' pattern of moves rests finally on the nature of the resources which they brought to their use of those moves. Furthermore, our consideration of the two essay introductions from this perspective has resulted in our recontextualisation of genre-based pedagogy within a different theory of genre – a theory which has not as yet had a marked impact on the teaching of writing but one which we would recommend.

Perhaps the most striking difference in the student's resources in this case derives from their differing knowledge of the topics they had selected. The writer of the 'soil' essay was a humanities student who had chosen an unfamiliar topic because she regarded it as a learning experience which would not be

available to her once her full-time academic studies began. Of course, herein lies part of her difficulties: as a disciplinary 'outsider', she is unaware of the ways in which the environmental sciences constitute their disciplinary voices in and through particular lexicogrammatical choices. Thus it is that her introduction contains a number of features more typical of the narrative discourse with which a humanities student tends to be familiar than of academic writing in the sciences. She sets a scene: a 'fertile crescent' between the Tigris and the Euphrates. She introduces human agents, 'our ancestors', 'we', 'more and more people'. These agents perform human actions: they do not 'pay attention'. Narrative, though her main resource, is not, however, the only discourse she draws on: she addresses the reader in a manner reminiscent of an oral presentation – 'How many of you know about soil?' Her opening sentence – 'It is said that...' – leads the reader to expect a second sentence which will indicate the writer's stance towards what 'is said'; however, since there is no such indication the opening sentence tends to function in the manner of 'history tells us' rather than as a lead-in to an academic argument. The 'privatization' writer, in contrast, is already 'inside' the discourse of his discipline; that is, he is already familiar with the meanings and values of Economics, and with how they are textualised in English. His first sentence refers to economic reasons for national initiatives. He refers to theoretical debates, to assumptions, and conceptions, he sets out to 'examine experience and performance' in the light of 'criteria' familiar to economists; he offers a 'definition'; he 'reviews', he 'presents arguments for and against' (see Kress, 1989b, for a discussion of the relationship between lexicogrammatical texture and disciplinary meaning-making).

Of course, the introduction to the 'soil' essay could be taken as a pointer to a limitation of genre-based pedagogy itself – and this brings us to a more general criticism that could be made of the genre-based approach in the form of the CARS model: it presupposes levels of disciplinary knowledge that in effect confine it to postgraduate students who have prior knowledge of their chosen subject. Certainly, Swales & Feak (1994), like Weissberg & Buker (1990) the authors of another well-known genre-based textbook, explicitly and exclusively target postgraduates. In other words, if students' resources do not include familiarity with the discourses of their subjects, it will be more difficult for them to use Swales' rhetorical moves and steps to improve the quality of their academic writing.

In indicating that there is more to learning to write an essay than being made aware of a set of moves, and in bringing the importance of the writer's 'resources' to the forefront, we have actually begun to turn the discussion of genre-based pedagogy in a new direction. In short, the implication of thus placing the writer centre stage is that we now focus on her as an individual with a history which inevitably shapes the assumptions she brings to her writing. As we shall indicate, this has consequences for how we read students' writing, but it does not, however, mean that we reject the importance of attention to linguistic forms and structures. What it rather indicates is that we look for, and find, the theoretical significance of 'genre' within the Australian debates around genre.

Although the pedagogic focus in Australia is primarily in the teaching of literacy to students in primary and secondary schools (e.g. Knapp & Watkins, 1995) 'genre' is also at the centre of academics' arguments concerning its meaning in relation to conceptions of text. Martin (1989), for example, identifies genres with text types: a genre is a staged structure with a social purpose. Genres as thus defined include exposition, description, and explanation. Kress (1989b, 1994) is the leading critic of this view of genre with its tendency to reify types and to treat genre as the dominant factor in the structuring of a text. In developing an alternative focus Kress argues that genres, rather than being determined by a general social purpose, are in fact formed out of the dynamics of social interactions involving participants in particular social relations. In keeping with that change of emphasis he proposes that 'genre' should be a 'term used to cover one aspect only of textual structuring' (in Cope & Kalantzis, 1993: 32). He thus substitutes 'forms of text' for the product-focused 'text-types', so creating a place for fluidity and hybridity within the stability of recognizable textual patternings.

Knapp (1997) follows the path opened up by Kress but offers a distinctive focus in his particular argument for the severance of genre from suggestions of formal fixity. He associates genre with Bourdieu's 'habitus' which denotes:

Systems of durable, transposable dispositions... (which) act as structuring structures... Objectively 'regulated' and 'regular', without being in any way the product of obedience to rules, they can be collectively orchestrated without being the product of the organizing action of a conductor. (Bourdieu, 1990: 53).

From this perspective genres are in fact internalized ways of knowing and expressing which can be acquired both consciously and unconsciously, and



which function as 'structuring structures' and not as sets of rules to be applied. In other words knowledge of a genre's conventions now denotes just one of the capacities necessary to produce texts. To put it another way, genres have come to be seen as ways of using language to make meaning, and not as semiotic systems or fixed codes.

The pedagogic corollary of this view of 'genre' is that it is perceived as just one of the resources which a student writer needs for the expression and communication of meaning. This change of focus accommodates the wider contexts of genre-in-practice. For example, it allows for the shaping role of other resources such a disciplinary knowledge (as we have shown above) and for disciplinary differences (see Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995). It also makes space for the contexts in which the students write – the criteria they are expected to meet, and issues of power and authority. In short it shifts attention to texts as produced in particular situations involving participants with particular histories in particular social relations.

This view of genre accommodates the explicit teaching of forms, but within the wider perspective of enhancing the writer's agency. Consequently, tutors who view the teaching of writing from that perspective will not eschew models but will ensure that discussions of generic forms serve primarily to support the students' own attempts at written meaning-making. Tutors will thus also alert students to the many other factors which shape their texts. This in turn means that tutors will read student texts not simply in order to identify what they have not done but also in an attempt to understand what they have done and why they might have done it that way. In other words, a student's essay comes to be seen as a hypothesis on the part of the student – a hypothesis that what she has written is what is required – and a knowledge of generic forms becomes just one component in the tutors' and students' repertoires.

## PART TWO

### From transmission to voice

The second part opens with a chapter, *Context as text: A course for student writers in higher education*, on my responsibilities as a teacher, and provides a view of a text as more than a teachable linguistic object.

In the fifth chapter of the dissertation, *Cracking the codes anew: Writing about literature in England*, I turn to the transition between school and university in England. I focus on writing about literature at A Level and in the university.

Chapter 6, *Creativity, conformity, and complexity in academic writing: Tensions at the interface*, deals with a tension in the teacher's positioning – this time when she is working with individual students on their written texts. She wants to help them to succeed by accommodating to institutional norms but at the same time she wants to assist them to project their own voices in their writing in their disciplinary fields of study.

The final chapter of Part Two, *Writing in postgraduate teacher training: A question of identity*, focuses on an important change in postgraduate teacher training. Schools became more involved in what had been mainly the responsibility of universities. This meant that trainee teachers had to spend a much greater period of time in schools. I argue that the primary purpose of much recommended reflection on practice should be to enhance the trainee teacher's agency.

These chapters are based on:

Scott, M.

1996 *Context as text: A course for student writers in higher education*. In G. Rijlaarsdam, H. Van den Bergh & M. Couzijn (eds.), *Effective teaching and learning of writing. Current trends in research*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 3-20.

Scott, M.

2002 Cracking the Codes Anew: Writing about Literature in England. In D. Foster & D.R. Russell (eds.), *Writing and Learning in Cross-National Perspective: Transitions from Secondary to Higher Education*. Urbana, Illinois: NCTE.

Scott, M & J.Turner

2004 Creativity, conformity and complexity in academic writing: Tensions at the interface. *Applied Linguistics at the Interface (British Studies in Applied Linguistics)*, 19, 2004.

Scott, M.

2000 Writing in postgraduate teacher training: A question of identity. In M. Lea & B. Stierer (eds.), *Student writing in higher education: new contexts*. Buckingham: Open University Press, 112-124.

## CHAPTER 4

# Context as text: a course for student writers in higher education

### 4.1 Introduction

The course which is the subject of this paper rests on the concept of the ‘reflective practitioner’. This concept unfixes the traditional meaning of ‘research’ as an investigation that conforms to a normative paradigm and brings within its boundaries the small-scale intervention which is based, like that discussed in this paper, on an individual’s observations in a particular context. Cohen & Manion (1994) refer, for example, to the situation of the single teacher operating on her own with her class and wishing to accomplish changes or improvements as a set of circumstances in which the roles of practitioner and researcher might be combined:

She will feel the need for some kind of change or improvement in teaching, learning or organization, for example, and will be in a position to translate her ideas into action in her own classroom. She is as it were both practitioner and researcher in one and will integrate the practical and theoretical orientations within herself. (p.189)

Research thus grounded in practice is often appropriately referred to as ‘action research’. In keeping with that focus it admits a wide range of data, including the anecdotal, as evidence to be interpreted in a manner not dissimilar to the critical reading of a literary text. In fact it treats even instances of teaching and learning as research in so far as they represent hypotheses about what constitutes effective practice (Stenhouse, 1978). A number of criticisms have been made of this extension of the ambit of ‘research’, with the difficulty of knowing how to interpret the data being highlighted (Winter, 1982). The criticisms do not, however, invalidate the primary justification of this mode of enquiry, which

depends on the testimony of practitioners to the importance to improved practice of studies characterised by specificity of content. At the centre of this testimony are first-hand accounts of the essential role of such particularity in adding to ‘the practitioner’s functional knowledge of the phenomena she deals with’ (Cohen & Manion, 1994) – an outcome which the generalizations and abstractions of the ‘paradigmatic mode’ (Bruner, 1985) of traditional research cannot achieve, valuable though they are for other purposes. In short, research that offers a critical and interpretive reading of particular practices in particular contexts can encourage what it itself represents, viz the ‘disposition to examine one’s own practice critically and systematically’ (Stenhouse, 1975). Pring (1978) holds out the possibility of a similar consequence when he recommends the individual teacher’s interrogation of his or her practice with the aid of theory in place of the unquestioning application of an ‘expert’s’ theory and research to practice. Barnett’s (1992) depiction of the ‘effective professional’ as a ‘reflective practitioner’ engaged in ‘conducting a continuing conversation with herself’ can serve as an elaboration of these general characterisations of the researcher’s approach and stance, especially in view of Barnett’s emphasis on the ‘critical edge’ of the ‘continuing conversation’:

The conversation has, too, a critical edge to it for the professional is always asking the question: what if...? Being faced with fresh problems to which there is no single answer, and no one right answer, the professional has the responsibility to appraise the situation and formulate an effective strategy. (Birch, 1988, p.186)

This paper accordingly records a pedagogic intervention, viz a new course in academic literacies, which is the product of an appraisal of a particular situation in a particular institution. It is hoped that the course will prove to be an ‘effective strategy’ in the face of a problem which relates to the growing realization in British universities that teaching a subject is not sufficient. Students need to be helped to learn not only how to learn, but also how to demonstrate their learning in written forms such as the essay, the report and the dissertation. In fact, as Kress (1989a) has shown, knowledge of a topic is not in itself enough to ensure academic success; the student also needs to be able to ‘write history’ or ‘science’ or ‘education’. Another fundamental assumption of the course in academic literacies is the importance to student attainment of not restricting the reflective practitioner role to the ‘professional’: ideally, ‘we are all reflective practitioners now’ (Barnett, 1992). Consequently, the course seeks to introduce

concepts that students can use to reflect on, and so improve the quality of, their reading and writing of academic texts. The justification for this linking of theoretical understandings to improvement in performance, particularly in academic writing, depends on research findings (e.g., Gibbs, 1981, 1994; Hounsell, 1984, 1987; Novak & Gowin, 1984) which demonstrate a correlation between levels of student achievement and student conceptions of what is required. These research results, like Bartholomae's (1985) emphasis on what student texts can reveal about student assumptions, support and generalise my impression as a tutor that a concentration on process to the exclusion of attention to product (White, 1988) is misplaced. While attention to the process of writing, e.g. to the value of drafting and redrafting, is obviously important, students need an appropriate conception of the 'product' to focus and guide their reading and writing processes.

The structure of this paper reflects the perspectives outlined above. The particular pedagogic context is first described in general terms as a frame for a brief discussion of the student dilemmas which have indicated a need for a course in academic literacies and have shaped the course's content and approach. A statement of the aims and modes of delivery of the course then precedes a discussion of the theoretical linchpins of the course, which together carry the argument that the the students referred to in the paper need a coherent theory of writing which can provide fresh or enhanced insights as sources of improved practice. Linked to that argument is the claim that well established approaches to the improvement of student writing are limited in their value to students as they offer incomplete or misleading concepts of the academic text. Finally the paper gives examples of student responses to the course and concludes by pointing to questions for which answers need to be sought and for which the traditional modes of large-scale, formal research would be appropriate. Thus, while recognising that by definition reflection on practice implies a concentration on a localised context, the paper attempts to open up its concerns to larger projects and other pedagogic contexts.

## 4.2 Background to the Course

### 4.2.1 The pedagogic context

The particular form and focus of the course in academic literacies derive initially from the general features of the pedagogic context in which it has been developed. It represents a response to the several kinds of diversity that characterise the Institute of Education University of London as a teaching and learning environment. Firstly, as a postgraduate school of the university, the Institute of Education offers courses ranging from the Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) and specialist diploma courses to master's and doctoral programmes in a large number of subject areas. Secondly, it is not only the range of courses and subjects but also the student body which represents diversity at the Institute of Education. There are, for example, recent graduates studying alongside students who are returning to higher education after an absence of a number of years. Furthermore, although most of the students are from Britain, the Institute also attracts a substantial number of students from the other countries in the EU and from overseas. Thus the student population annually comprises students from over eighty countries who bring with them a diversity of academic and educational experience that reflects both national and local differences in learning and teaching practices. Adding diversity to diversity is the fact that a significant number of the students, including those from Britain, are not 'native speakers' of English.

### 4.2.2 The need for a course in academic literacies

The corollary of the patterns of diversity thus constituted by any group of students at the Institute of Education is a corresponding diversity in the students' assumptions, expectations and experience in relation to a central requirement of all courses, viz the reading of academic texts and the production of written coursework or a dissertation. This diversity is, however, often made invisible by the students' tendency to express their needs and difficulties in general terms. Since 1986 groups of incoming students attending an orientation course at the Institute of Education have been asked to work collaboratively in constructing a description of the 'good' written assignment. The following set of criteria is typical: relevance to essay title; evidence of critical reading; a coherent argument; accuracy in the use of language; a clear, lucid and appropriate style. I

initially thought that this list indicated that the students all understood what was required in an academic essay or a dissertation since the list matches conventional assessment criteria and tutor comments on student essays and chapters. As is so often the case in a teaching and learning situation, it was comments voiced by the students in their evaluation of the activity, which led me to question my optimistic assumption. The following comment is reproduced annually in one form or another in the students' evaluations:

What we have given [i.e. as the criteria of a 'good' assignment] is what we had been told before we arrived or what we found in study skills books on the pre-course reading lists. But we all have different ideas about what the criteria mean. What does being 'critical' actually mean in this context? Is being critical in Psychology of Education the same as being critical in Curriculum Studies – in terms of how we write, I mean?

While the comment above emphasises individual and disciplinary differences in the interpretation of the conventional criteria, the one below recommends a more coherent and comprehensive description of the 'good' piece of writing. It, too, is typical.

We have drawn up a list of components – but in our group when we thought about one component we found we needed to think about the others, too, and that is what study skills books do not give us. In thinking about language, for example, we also need to think about what constructing a coherent argument looks like in essays in Education, and thinking about an argument means thinking about what it means to read critically. Everything is intertwined – and that is what's so difficult. We need something more integrated, a broader view, not the hotch-potch of rules and norms that we now have.

The following comment echoes the one above in its reference to the need for a coherent picture but conveys more strongly the students' sense of what it is that they need, viz a 'language', 'concepts':

They [the list of criteria of the 'good' assignment] seem – and are obviously – 'right' but somehow they end up being mystifying. They don't provide a coherent picture. We can't say what that would be; we haven't got the language, the concepts, either to show the inadequacy of our list or to provide a better alternative.

The impression of need given by the representative comments quoted above was reinforced by student responses to another of the activities that regularly form part of the orientation programme. Asked to evaluate a selection of student



essays in the light of their criteria of the ‘good’ assignment, students annually produce a range of interpretations and weightings. For example, ‘evidence of critical reading’ to some means the use of references to support points, while to others it has a more appropriate meaning, viz evaluating ideas encountered in the literature for their positive and negative aspects. Criteria relating to language and style are applied in ways that reflect an even greater diversity of meanings deriving from past learnings:

- the writer uses ‘I’; that is wrong in a scholarly work, you must be impersonal;
- there are too many impersonal constructions;
- the style is not formal enough;
- the style is too formal;
- the introduction isn't arresting;
- the introduction does not give the structure of the essay.

While discussion of such conflicting meanings when they arise obviously has some value, it leaves intact the students' general tendency to operate rules independently of each other; in short it does not address the need they expressed above for a ‘coherent picture’.

Faced with such evidence of the often incomplete and inappropriate diversity of student perceptions, and mindful of the research findings – to which reference has already been made – that conceptions correlate with performance, my colleagues and I concluded on reflection that the students had identified a weakness in dominant perspectives on ‘study skills’. They had perceived the general and fragmentary nature of the conventional descriptions of texts and the consequent failure of the descriptions to accommodate the detail and diversity of student difficulties. In short, they had highlighted the need for descriptions of academic texts that are appropriate to the discipline, comprehensive, and usable as a means of improving the quality of student performance. The staff response to the students’ indication of that need has been the development of a short course in academic literacies. Academic literacies and not academic literacy was chosen as the focus of the course in order to denote differences in the characteristics of writing within different disciplines. The course is in its infancy, having run last year for the first time. It is currently offered to M.A. students in Education as a one-term, three hours a week, option and is also open

to research (i.e. M.Phil and Ph.D) students. My colleagues and I are, however, considering the feasibility of making the course more widely available in future.

## **4.3 The Course**

### **4.3.1 Aims of the course**

The following brief statement of the aims of the course summarises and refocuses a number of points that have already been made. Firstly, the primary concern of the course is to raise the participants' level of awareness of the characteristic features of academic texts – both published texts and those produced by students – within particular disciplines. In other words the course attempts to move students on from the fragmented characterisation of the 'good' essay referred to above by offering them theoretical understandings that could equip them to reflect on their own reading and writing practices in ways that might lead to improved performance. Secondly, it is also an aim of the course that the students should be able to convert theoretical insights to 'usable knowledge' (Schon, 1982, 1987). The content of the course is, therefore, presented in relation to the statements of student needs and difficulties, which I have collected over the years. Another feature of the course, which also falls within the aim of using theory to reflect on practice, is that participants suggest areas of need or difficulty on the basis of their own experience as readers and writers of academic texts. In other words they are encouraged to take some responsibility for the content and shape of the course, which means that each year's course is likely to differ in some ways from that of earlier years.

### **4.3.2 Modes of delivery of the course**

Several modes of delivery are used. Workshops are given a central role. In them the theoretical dimensions of the course are grounded in the students' collaborative discussion of texts – both published texts and, with the students' prior consent, the students' own writing – and of teaching and learning materials intended to promote more effective reading and writing of academic texts. Students are referred to relevant literature for the purpose of consolidating or challenging their understandings, and the course includes some seminars devoted to a discussion of key references (e.g. Bazerman, 1981; Hounsell, 1984,

1987; Kress, 1989b, 1994). To foster the forging of a link between theory and practice, the students are encouraged to keep diaries in which they reflect on their writing and reading and, where relevant, on their teaching, in the light of the seminar discussions and their reading. The importance of theoretical understandings of the nature of academic texts as a means of reflecting on reading and writing practices is emphasised also by the use of student comments or queries both to open each session and to return to with an enlarged understanding at the end of the session. Like the selection of texts and materials these quotations will be chosen each year on the basis of their pertinence to the courses of study for which the participants are registered and to the tutors' and students' perceptions of the students' needs. Lectures are kept to a minimum and mainly serve to integrate and foster emerging insights.

### **4.3.3 Building a theoretical framework**

As indicated earlier, the primary aim of the course is to give participants the opportunity to build a theoretical framework that can assist them to adopt the role of 'reflective practitioner' in relation to their own academic reading and writing. It is assumed, however, that it is pedagogically best to begin where the students are, i.e. with a critique of theories with which most students are already familiar to a greater or lesser degree. For that reason a critical discussion of the EAP (English for Academic Purposes) and cognitive focuses forms an early part of the course. Tutors and students then turn to the kinds of problems and queries which these approaches do not address, which introduces the theme of 'context-as-text'. The visibility in texts of the contexts that Bazerman (1981) delineates, in conjunction with questions from Kress (1994), are used as points of entry into the immediate issues each context raises as well as into the wider debates concerning, for example, authority, identity and creativity. We also draw on other writings (e.g. Fairclough, 1989, 1993; Kress, 1989b; Myers, 1990; Swales, 1990, 1993) and on relevant research (e.g. Mitchell, 1994).

In the next part of this chapter I give a more detailed account of these central theoretical nodes in the network of ideas which has shaped the design of the course and which it is hoped will meet the needs of student readers and writers of academic texts. In discussing the EAP and cognitive perspectives I have chosen to focus on key texts which students have referred to. In the case of the context-as-text approach I present Bazerman's (1981) contexts and questions from Kress (1994) which translate the contexts into analytical strategies. I also

illustrate some of the wider issues that the context-related questions can accommodate.

### **EAP (English for Academic Purposes) Perspective**

I begin by quoting a student. The quotation is typical in its conception of what is required and in its sense of the unfamiliarity of the academic essay. It is also typical in its expression of a wish for an immediate and total solution:

I can write personal letters and I keep a diary, but I do not have the language I need for academic essays in education. Will this book give me all I need?

The book referred to is *English in Education* (Laird, 1977). Although it is not a recent publication, it is typical of a dominant approach within EAP which represents the mainstream of provision for ‘non-native speakers’ of English in British universities. Publishers have responded to the presence of the increasingly large number of such students by producing course books dealing, for example, with English for Law or English for Medicine or, as in this case, English for Education. The teacher’s edition states that the aim of the book is:

To develop in students who are entering higher education an ability to handle the kind of written English that they will be concerned with as an integral part of their specialist subjects. [...] The purpose is to make students aware of the way English is used in written communication, and thereby to help them develop techniques of reading and to provide them with a guide for their own writing. (p. ix)

The aim – ‘to make students aware’ – is translated in each unit of the book into a series of exercises that begin with questions of the true/false kind about short texts that are presented as typical of the language and concepts of the foundation disciplines in Education, for example, sociology, psychology, philosophy, or of key issues such as streaming and setting. The exercises that follow the passages-with-questions require the practice of forms and functions characteristic of the particular discipline, and the use of cohesive devices to construct coherent paragraphs that are discipline-specific in their content.

EAP has been strongly criticised. Widdowson (1983), for example, points out that there is often a gap between what is taught and the demands of a student’s course of study; a criticism which could be levelled at the exercises in *English in Education*. My primary criticism of EAP takes another direction, however, and focuses on its whittling down of the contexts of written communication in its concentration on a selection of the forms, functions and

cohesive devices that characterize the language of a discipline. EAP thus treats academic discourse as a collection of linguistic resources to be drawn on by the writer and offers no understanding of the meanings of those resources within the epistemologies of the discipline.

The following example from Laird (1977) lends itself to the elaboration of these comments on the shortcomings of EAP. In a chapter headed ‘The psychology of education’ (p. 51) she states: ‘Psychologists often use the impersonal passive when they describe experiments.’ She then gives examples: ‘A group of people **were asked** to learn a list of twelve nonsense syllables [...] and **were tested** [...] Intelligence tests **were given** in fifteen schools [...].’ There next follows an exercise in which students are asked to change the verbs in a series of sentences from active to passive. The content of each of the sentences relates to the psychology of education. For example: ‘Psychologists studied children’s drawings in order to assess their development of perception.’

As these quotations indicate, the impersonal passive is simply presented as a typical linguistic feature that should be unquestioningly imitated by the student. What is missing is any explanation of how it is that the impersonal passive has become a convention within the academic discourses of psychology. There is no reference to the meanings and values of psychology; to, for example, its concern with rationality and objectivity and its identification of its procedures and epistemologies with those of science; nor is there any indication of the challenges within educational psychology to that set of meanings. Confronted with this view of text students are not helped to consider the conventions as means of generating their own meanings within the context of the discourses of the discipline. In other words the linguistic features of a discipline are presented as simply given and not as the product of the history of the discipline with its developing and conflicting discourses in the sense of ‘discourse’ which Kress (1989b), following Foucault, glosses as the linguistic expression of the meanings and values of an institution such as law, science, medicine, education.

The student quoted at the beginning of this discussion of EAP asked if Laird’s book was all he needed. While it certainly does not capture all there is to an academic text it may be of some use to some students under particular circumstances; for example, it may help the student – usually a ‘non-native-speaker’ of English – who needs to practise or revise the forms of language used in academic discourse and who already has an understanding of the epistemology of the discipline. In my experience, however, most students do not

fall into that category. They need a different view of ‘written communication’ from that which Laird derives from a particular focus within mainstream linguistics, viz the emphasis in pragmatics and discourse analysis on the uses of linguistic forms in the construction of coherent and unified texts. In other words, they need an insight into the boundaries of the text that extend beyond the linguistic. Those boundaries will form the topic of discussion later in this paper when they will serve to refocus the linguistic concerns of EAP and also the theoretical emphases of another dominant perspective on academic texts, viz the cognitive perspective, which is the subject of the next part of this paper.

### **The cognitive perspective**

The following quotation captures a student response to what in my experience is typical tutor advice:

My tutor says that I need to learn to shape my essays into an argument. What do you think of this paper on essay-writing? All the students taking psychology are told to read it to help them do better.

The paper referred to is Hounsell (1987) *Essay Writing and the Quality of Feedback* (in Richardson, Eysenck, & Warren Piper, 1987, p. 109-119). It represents an adaptation of key concepts from cognitive frameworks which have been applied to the reading and writing of students in higher education, viz the ‘deep approach’ and its antithesis, the ‘surface approach’. These terms, which derive from the work of Ference Marton in Gothenburg, have been developed in Lancaster, Edinburgh and Australia by Noel Entwistle and others (see Entwistle, 1981; Gibbs, 1994). Hounsell’s primary distinction, which matches the contrast between deep and surface approaches, is between interpretive and non-interpretive approaches to essay-writing. In his analysis of undergraduate’s conceptions of what they are required to do in a history essay, for example, he identifies ‘argument’ as the interpretative conception which all the students need but many lack. The defining characteristic of ‘argument’ is a ‘distinctive position’ supported by ‘data’ and imposing a unified pattern of ‘organization’ on the content of the essay.

As already mentioned, Hounsell’s research demonstrates a correlation between the students’ conceptions of essay-writing and their levels of performance as assessed by their tutors. The terms he uses and his emphasis on ‘argument’ as the most pertinent global conception also match the criteria many

tutors hold and present explicitly to their students (Riddle, 1994). However, as I have argued elsewhere (Scott, 1992, 1994), the cognitive perspective, which Hounsell demonstrates, is open to criticism on a number of grounds, especially in relation to its view of text. Hounsell (1987), for example, concludes that in discussing student conceptions of essay-writing he is actually discussing conceptions of academic discourse which he identifies with the tacit or explicit realisation of the discipline's norms in making meaning. However, in his conception of meaning-making he places the emphasis on the architecture of a text, neglecting to discuss in any detail the manner or style in which the architecture is executed in different disciplines. The conventions of argument in a philosophy text with its continual refutation of possible counter-arguments are, for example, very different from the conventions of argument in a history paper with its distinctive position supported by evidence (Mitchell, 1994). There are also, as Swales (1993) points out, differences in the accepted ways of writing papers in the same discipline in different countries. Furthermore, the degree of authority the writer can claim or not claim, and the anticipated audiences will affect the execution of the argument. Thus Hounsell's view of text, like the EAP perspective, lacks important dimensions. In short, neither it, nor it in combination with the EAP approach, is adequate as a representation of the nature of academic discourse. It is consequently of limited usefulness to the student. It may serve as a reminder of what is required if the student already knows how to write 'argument' within the discipline she is studying, and is secure in her sense of the writer-reader relation. However, students not yet initiated into the discipline and its conventions, and uncertain about their authority as writers, tend, in my experience as a tutor, to respond to general statements about the importance of 'argument', 'data' and 'organization' with anxiety and feelings of inadequacy.

### **Context-as-text**

In discussing the EAP and cognitive perspectives I have pointed to what is missing in their descriptions of academic texts. The following student comments which I have heard repeatedly during the past nine years refer to aspects of academic texts in Education which escape the EAP and cognitive nets:

1. We need to know how to write 'education'; to know what is an acceptable style, and what we can say. I mean, if I have to write about the influence of

television, say, well, that could be a topic in many academic subject areas, or in popular journalism. What kind of topic is it in 'education'?

2. I do not know how to use references.
3. I never know to what extent I need to show I know something that I know my tutor knows. I mean I am not writing as an academic but as a student.
4. We are told to include our own experience but how do I fit it into the pattern of my reading? How anecdotal can we be in an 'education' essay? If I write about adolescence, say, can I refer to my own experience and to the fact that the books do not describe adolescence in Sierra Leone?

These comments fall within the compass of the four inter-related contexts which Bazerman (1981) traces in three examples of academic discourse, viz a paper about the structure of DNA by F.H.C. Crick and J.D. Watson, a paper on the ambivalence of science by Robert K. Merton, and a paper on Wordsworth's later style by Geoffrey H. Hartman. Bazerman terms the contexts 'the object under study', 'the literature of the field', 'the anticipated audience', and 'the author's own self'. Together these contexts are said to constitute the visibility in a text of the meanings and values of the discipline, i.e. the visibility of the discourses of the discipline. The student comments 1 and 4, quoted above, clearly come within the boundaries of the 'object of study'. The following quotation illustrates the significance Bazerman attaches to that context in its shaping of texts:

The nature of the symbolization, the frameworks in which the objects are identified, the precision of the identification, and the tightness of the fit between name and object indicate the quality of the tie between text and world. (p. 362)

The literature of the field is explicitly referred to in comments 2 and 4 above and implied in comments 1 and 3. Bazerman explains the different ways in which this context may be visible in a text:

Explicit citation and implicit knowledge indicate an article's relationship to the previous literature on the subject. About explicit references questions arise concerning the precision of meaning conveyed by the reference, the relationship of the reference to the claim of the article, the use made of the reference, and the manner of the discussion. About implicitly used knowledge, questions arise concerning the extent of codification and the role the knowledge takes in the argument. (p. 362-363).

The other two contexts which Bazerman discusses, viz the 'anticipated audience' and 'the writer's own self', are reflected in comments 3 and 4 above,



and are implicit in comments 1 and 2. Bazerman offers a description of how a text may invoke or refer to those contexts:

Attention to the anticipated audience can be seen in the knowledge and attitudes the text assumes that the reader will have, in the types of persuasion attempted, in the structuring of the argument, and in the charge given by the author to the readers (i.e. what he would like the readers to do after being convinced by the article). Finally, the author is represented in several ways within the text. The human mind stands between the reality it perceives and the language it speaks in; statements reflect the thoughts, purposes, observations, and quirks of the individual. The individual can be seen in the breadth and originality of the article's claims, in the idiosyncracies of cognitive framework, in reports of introspection, experience, and observation, and in value assumptions. These features add up to a persona, a public face, which makes the reader aware of the author as an individual statement-maker coming to terms with reality from a distinctive perspective. (p. 363)

As is demonstrated by the student comments quoted above, each of the four contexts carries implications for the other contexts. Bazerman emphasises that inter-relationship. For example, in discussing the paper on the structure of DNA by Crick and Watson, Bazerman links the accepted existence of DNA as a 'substance found in nature' to the authors' use of the literature of the field, and to their anticipated audience and the form in which they as authors are present in the text:

All other contexts are subordinated to this primary one so that the article may appear to speak univocally about nature. The previous literature on the subject is sorted out according to the criterion of closeness of fit between the observed phenomena and the claims made. [...] The audience is assumed to share the same criteria of closeness of fit, discreteness, robustness, and reproducibility for acceptance of claims [...], therefore the audience can be relied on to have much the same assessment of the literature as the author does, and persuasion may proceed by maintaining apparent focus on the object of study. [...] Finally, the authors' apparent presence is minimized by the common pursuit of authors, literature and audience to establish a common, codified, symbolic analogue for nature. [...] The persona is humbled before nature. (p. 3643-65)

Bazerman's contexts are finally social in several respects: they refer to the epistemologies that currently constitute the disciplines; to the writers' sense of audience; to their conceptions of their own roles and positions in relation both to their audiences and to the disciplines; and together the contexts constitute a

discourse, as defined by Kress, in their linguistic realisation of particular discipline-specific meanings and values. In fact, questions which Kress (1994) invites readers to ask of all texts can be accommodated within Bazerman's focus on context-as-text. I discuss below each of the questions, illustrating its significance by referring both to Crick and Watson's paper and to its relevance to student writers' concerns, with examples from workshops I have run. Finally I offer an evaluation of the questions as complements to Bazerman's contexts.

*a. Why should anyone be making this text; i.e. what is its motivation; how has it come about?*

For the reader of the article on DNA, answering this question requires a knowledge of the place of Crick and Watson's research within the field. For students reflecting on the requirements of their written assignments the question involves considering on the one hand the role of the particular type of assignment, for example, the essay or report or dissertation, in the course of study for which the student is registered and, on the other hand, the relation of the assignment topic to other topics in the curriculum or to other angles on the same topic. In workshops I have run Kress' questions have spawned others, such as:

- What do tutors on this course in this institution regard as the purpose of the essay or the dissertation?
- Why is this topic considered important enough for an assignment to be set on it?
- Why do I regard this topic as suitable for a dissertation?
- What is the significance of the wording of this text, i.e. the given assignment title?
- Why have I chosen this assignment title from the list of those set?
- Why have I adopted this approach to this topic?

In considering such questions the student is inevitably drawn into delineating the field of knowledge and enquiry, the course tutors' expectations, and also her own motivations and assumptions. In other words the question prompts attention both to the academic culture (Clanchy & Ballard, 1988) and to individual interests and their history. These issues tend to merge with those generated by the next of Kress' questions which focuses on the participants and their relation.

*b. What are the crucial characteristics of the situation; i.e. who are the relevant participants in the making of the text; what was the institutional setting; to what extent does this text conform to or depart from other instances of texts made in the same or a closely similar situation?*

Crick and Watson are the primary participants in their paper about the structure of DNA, and so are their intended audiences of fellow scientists. It is possible also to include in a list of participants those writers or researchers who are cited and also those whose work might be judged to be relevant but who are silenced by omission. The institutional setting is the university in one sense and science in another. In both senses of 'institution' it is a setting in which Crick and Watson have prestige and power. In keeping with their status the text about DNA is a research paper that appears in a scholarly journal. It conforms in its style to that genre within science. In the case of the student writer the question above foregrounds the issue of authority, the crucial characteristic of the situation being that the setting is an educational institution and the student is writing for someone who will assess the student's writing. The question thus brings into focus the asymmetry which, as Bernstein (1975) points out, always exists between tutor and taught. It is consequently a question in which my students have found other questions relating to their position as students, for example:

- Do I write for my tutor or do I write as if I were an academic writing for a particular journal?
- Can I give a personal opinion even though I am not an expert?
- Who am I writing as?
- What do tutors mean when they say they want our own ideas?
- Can I write 'I' in an essay?
- What is the purpose of references in an assignment?
- What does it mean to be 'original' in a Ph.D. dissertation?
- How critical can I be?

These questions all relate primarily to the students' anxieties about the presentation of self in a written assignment and to the kind of response they anticipate. Like Ivanic (1993) and Lea (1994) I have found that some students hold a Romantic notion of writing as self-expression and regard the linguistic

conventions of academic discourse as a threat to their sense of personhood. Others are so afraid of criticism of their writing, which they regard as an extension of themselves, that they are reluctant to express a personal judgment and so attempt to hide behind impersonal expressions and formulaic structures such as thesis, antithesis, synthesis – a structure which had been presented to an Algerian student when she was an undergraduate as the exemplary pattern of all academic argument. These extreme positions need to be discussed. Both groups of students need to become aware that in their different ways they share the same misconception: conventions do not obliterate self. Neither, however, is the concept of ‘free expression’ held by some critics of academic discourse (e.g. Clark, 1993; Ivanic, 1993) a possibility. The writer does not invent the conventional forms but, to a greater or lesser degree, she remakes them; or as Bakhtin (1986) puts it in discussing ‘utterances’, both spoken and written:

One can say that any word exists for the user in three aspects: as a neutral word of a language, belonging to nobody; as an **other’s** word, which belongs to another person and is filled with echoes of the other’s utterance; and finally as **my** word, for, since I am dealing with it in a particular situation, with a particular speech plan, it is already imbued with my expression. (p. 88)

Student questions relating to authority, like those quoted above, can draw attention also to the minutiae of textual conventions and to the conventions of argument. The degree of directness that is considered appropriate in critique, the language structures that express it, and the conventions for quoting sources, together with the meanings of the tenses used in citations, are some examples of textual features that Kress’ question opens up to view, and for which there is a growing body of literature to which students can be referred (for example, Swales, 1990, 1993; Weissberg & Buker, 1990). All these topics can encourage a discussion of the students’ past learnings and of cultural differences such as those relating to hedging which Myers (1989) and Bloor & Bloor (1991), for example, document. I have found, too, that students’ understandings of the import of Kress’ question for their awareness of the textual expression of the writer-reader relation are enhanced if they are introduced to Bakhtin’s (1952-53/1986) concept of the ‘dialogic’ utterance – spoken or written – that is constituted by ‘addressivity’:

Addressivity, the quality of turning to someone, is a constitutive feature of the utterance; without it the utterance does not, cannot exist. [...] Language as a system

has an immense supply of purely linguistic means for expressing formal address: lexical, morphological (the corresponding cases, pronouns, personal forms of verbs), and syntactical (various standard phrases and modifications of sentences). But they actually acquire addressivity only in the whole of a concrete utterance. (p. 99)

Having thus drawn attention to the overt textual signals of the dialogic nature of utterances, Bakhtin adds the following proviso:

The expression of this actual addressivity is never exhausted, of course, by these special language (grammatical) means. [...] The choice of all language means is made by the speaker under varying degrees of influence from the addressee and his anticipated response. (p. 99)

I have used these quotations to stimulate and focus students' close examination of their own and others' texts. The audience-influenced features that the students have pointed out in their own writing include: the level of formality of the utterance (e.g. 'I chose *achieve their aim* in place of *get what they want* because I was writing an essay to be assessed by the examiner'); the choice of pronouns (e.g. 'I used *we* because at that point I was writing as a fellow educationist'); inclusions or omissions ('I put that point in because it was emphasised in lectures'; 'I did not say what I really thought because I knew my tutor would not agree'). In discussing excerpts from journal articles or books within the frame of the same quotations from Bakhtin (1952-53/1986), students have made comments such as:

The writer [Bernstein, 1975] is writing for his peers and not for students. He assumes his readers know the meaning in sociology of technical terms such as 'reproduction' and 'structure'. This other text [Chapman, 1986], though, is clearly from a textbook in sociology; there is far less technical language, far more explanation, repetition and signposts to help the reader follow the argument.

Another advantage in introducing Bakhtin's concepts to students lies in Bakhtin's metaphorical extension of 'dialogic' to include the 'responsiveness' of any text to other texts. This is a broader concept than 'intertextuality', which tends to focus on the visible indebtedness of a text to other texts, in that it reaches out into a number of related topics discussed in the literature about academic reading and writing; for example, the differences between narrative and argument (Andrews, 1989) and the student's sense of purpose in 'reading-to-write' (Flower, 1990). A discussion of 'responsiveness' can in short lead the student writer to include the following in her list of considerations when

assessing her written ‘argument’: her criteria in deciding on inclusions and omissions; the place of the assignment topic within the discipline; the tutor’s or lecturer’s comments, the anticipated audience, her sense of her position and obligations as a writer. In short, the conventional definition of argument as the ‘taking up of a distinctive position’ can draw into itself, and be illuminated by, all of Bazerman’s contexts. It can thus come to reflect the view of the academic text as the product of a multi-dimensional social situation involving individuals with particular histories in interaction with competing disciplinary discourses.

*c. Where does this way of writing come from? (The question refers to discourse as in the discourse of medicine, i.e. to the institutional organization of knowledge and language)*

When asked of Crick and Watson’s paper, the answer to this question covers the kinds of comments Bazerman makes when discussing the ‘object under study’ as a ‘substance in nature’. Those comments were quoted earlier. Student writers considering this question have found it a stimulus to the careful study of examples of academic texts in their discipline, which has led to a discussion of the history of the discipline’s discourse and its characteristic conventions. The question thus provides a dimension that is missing in Laird (1977) and Hounsell (1984, 1987). Laird, as we have seen, makes available to students the opportunity to practise the forms of language used, for example, in psychology and students do, of course, need to be able to use such forms; Hounsell offers a reminder that argument is required in essays, but neither Laird nor Hounsell links forms to meaning and to the genesis and history of meaning within a discipline. Students are consequently deprived of the possibility of understandings which could enhance their ability to use conventions in the generation of meaning within the discipline, and are offered instead the mechanistic application of norms and rules.

#### **4.4 What other ways of writing about this topic are there or might there be?**

This question draws attention to the distinctiveness of a particular discourse, which is the central theme of Bazerman’s paper, and to competing discourses within a discipline. It also touches on the issues included under Question 1. A vivid illustration of discursive distinctiveness is provided by the contrast Myers

(1990) draws between the narrative of science on the one hand with its use of impersonal constructions and the passive voice (data are obtained, models are constructed and developed, and techniques are used, p. 152-153), and on the other, the sensationalised ‘popular’ narrative of nature in which deer use their spear-like antlers to engage in ferocious combat over harems (p. 153). Myers’ texts demonstrate that grammatical structures are not empty forms but carry meanings and values. I have used Myers’ texts in a workshop. To illustrate the textual realisation of different meanings and values within the same discipline the workshop also included the discussion of psychology texts ranging from those which adopt the impersonal structures and statistical procedures which demonstrate the aspiration towards science of some branches of psychology, to the autobiographical, metaphorical style of some psycho-analytical writing.

The advantage of Kress’ questions as a complement to Bazerman’s paper on the shaping of texts by their contexts are several. Firstly the questions being couched in easier-to-understand language shed light on the central themes of Bazerman’s linguistically dense paper while also deriving greater meaning from the paper; secondly, the questions can be applied to student texts as well as to the published works of established researchers and can thus highlight the particular tensions of the student writer’s situation as is evident in some of the student questions that I have quoted; and thirdly, in converting theory to explicit analytical strategies the questions make a bridge between the theoretical insights of the academic researcher and the ‘action’ orientations of the teacher and learner – a bridge which Marris & Rein (1967) called an impossibility. Finally, as I have attempted to show, the questions reach out into difficult issues relating to authority, creativity, and identity – issues that trouble students, as the quotations above indicate, but ones which students seldom, in my experience, have the opportunity to discuss. To put it another way, while Bazerman is primarily concerned with disciplinary differences in the shaping of texts and thus selects texts in which the writers’ principal roles are those of recognised authorities, Kress’ questions can assist learners to become aware of their uncertainties and dilemmas in relation to what is expected of them as readers and writers within academic disciplines. It is hoped that that awareness will generate new, more helpful perspectives and strategies.

#### **4.4.1 The course's refocusing of the EAP and cognitive perspectives**

In the first part of this paper I indicated that the EAP and cognitive perspectives on text refer to essential components of the student's repertoire – writers and readers need to be able to recognise and use the appropriate forms of language, and in British and other, if not all, national contexts they also need to be able to construct a coherent, logical argument. At the same time I criticised both the EAP and cognitive perspectives for the reductiveness of their conceptions of the academic text. The contexts referred to in Bazerman's paper and reflected in Kress' questions take us beyond those limitations. The forms of language now appear in a new light – they are the resources for making meaning within a discipline, while the adoption of a distinctive position, which is the defining feature of argument for Hounsell (1984, 1987), is now seen as involving an individual in a particular situation (e.g. this course in this institution) and particular role (e.g. that of an academic or student) in constructing meanings for a particular audience (e.g. fellow academics or a tutor) within the meanings and values of a discipline. In short the view of text that has been offered in this paper makes possible a more comprehensive view of 'written communication' and of 'argument' in which the structures of language and of argument are brought together, refocused, and given new significance.

#### **4.4.2 An example of the use of the theoretical framework in a tutorial context**

The course in academic literacies is not intended as the only form of assistance to student learners. It is supplemented by individual tutorials at which students' written assignments are discussed in detail. To demonstrate that the enlarged perspective on the nature of the academic text which this paper presents is also pertinent in the tutorial context, I use an excerpt from a student essay which was a new student's first piece of writing and had been set as short preparation task for the next week's lecture. The essay title that had been given to the students together with a short reading list was: 'Discuss the traditional and the progressive approaches to the curriculum.' The essay of which the excerpt below is a substantial part had been returned to the student with the following comment attached to it: 'You have not constructed an argument.' The student – a science teacher who had not written an essay since leaving school – was puzzled by that comment. 'But I thought I had constructed an argument,' she said, 'I gave others' opinions and I included my own.' When given Hounsell's



characterization of ‘argument’ she claimed that what she had done fitted his description. When shown how to re-organize the content of her essay in such a way that her position in her final paragraph became the unifying theme of the essay, she replied that while she could appreciate the improvements made to the essay under discussion, she could not use what she had been shown to help her write essays on other topics. ‘It’s too far from where I am. It’s too abstract,’ she said. That comment led tutor and student to look closely at her writing to see where she in fact was. The conclusion was that her conception of an argument was of groups of protagonists with strongly-held beliefs who emphatically put forward those beliefs. Her essay suggested that she saw her role as that of a listener to a debate – for the oral debate seemed to be her model – whose task it was to decide which party or motion she supported. However, she chose to side not with one of the main protagonists but with Moore (1974) whose book on the philosophy of education was on the reading list; in other words she adopted the role of mediator and advocate of a compromise, perhaps in a final recognition of the rational quality of educational discourse. Her move from ‘I’ to ‘one’ as the subject of the verbs is in keeping with that change of focus.

In the excerpt which appears below and is typical of the very short piece, I have italicized the nouns and pronouns which indicate the writer’s conversion of the ‘approaches’ of the title into protagonists, and also the verbs and other parts of speech that carry connotations of personal opinion and not of reasoned positions. Italics have thus been used not only for phrases such as ‘the traditionalists believe’ but also for those like ‘he [i.e. the teacher] should’ and ‘they were to be’ where ‘should’ and ‘were to’ imply individual judgements, not argument. ‘Moore (1974)’ is also in italics since the word ‘like’ which precedes it ascribes a verb of opinion, viz, ‘thinks’, to Moore.

### **Discuss the traditional and the progressive approaches to the curriculum.**

*Traditionalists* emphasize the product, *the progressives* the process. It can be said that the ghost of Plato is present to some extent in the traditional approach. Plato *believed* that men were born with souls of gold, silver or bronze. He recommended a different kind of education for the three groups. He was most interested in the souls of gold. People with such souls were to be educated to rule. They were to be philosopher kings. Through the study of mathematics and metaphysics they were to come to apprehend the Absolute, the Form of the Good. He *believed* that the path to virtue lay through reason.

The progressive approach is often linked to the theories of Rousseau. Rousseau *believed* that the child is born good but corrupted by society. However, he was not an extreme *follower* of what are now called progressive methods. He believed that the tutor should act in the child's best interests. He should satisfy his needs and not his wants. He *recommended* a different curriculum for pupils of different ages. He emphasised concrete experience in the education of young children. He *believed* that the child is naturally curious.

The *progressives* emphasise that the teacher *should make use* of the child's interests and everyday knowledge. They *should construct* a curriculum of activities. They *should* integrate the traditional subjects. The *traditionalists* have different *assumptions* about the nature of the child.

I think *like Moore* (1974) that one *should* try to combine traditional and progressive approaches. One can teach traditional subjects but try to use progressive methods and emphasize process not only product. In that way one can combine intellectual rigour and creativity. The 'hidden curriculum' will then convey to the pupils the idea that self-discipline and intellectual flexibility are both important.

The student writer of the excerpt above called the analysis 'illuminating'. 'It's true,' she said, 'my model was the debate and people taking sides.' On the basis of that recognition she was able to move towards an appreciation of the 'object of study' as constituted not by opinions that demand adherence but by concepts and theories, and of her place in the text not as a voice of agreement or disagreement or final compromise, but as a reflective and critical mind-at-work.

## 4.5 Conclusion

As has already been stated, the course is in its infancy, having been offered only once. Nevertheless, the student questions I have quoted suggest that it is fulfilling its aim of encouraging the 'disposition to examine one's own practice critically and systematically' (Pring, 1978). That impression is reinforced by the comments in the students' end-of-course evaluations. The following is typical of the students' sense of an increased reflectiveness on their part:

I just hadn't realised how much there is to academic literacies. I have certainly found that what we discussed influenced my own writing – just being more aware. For me it was the self in the text that was the important issue. I have come to understand all the ways that I am in the text and when I try not to be visible. Realising my

subterfuges has made me avoid them. I have become bolder, and that means I have learned more because I have taken risks and not played safe all the time.

This quotation also illustrates an aspect of the students' response to the course which featured in all the evaluations but which we had not expected to be so strong, viz the the students' conviction of the positive effect on their learning of their sense of greater self-understanding. As the student quoted above puts it: 'I have become bolder and that means I have learned more.' A related outcome, and one that was also unexpected, was the positive effect of the course on the tutors. The need to think beyond the conventional descriptions of the academic text and the opportunity to learn from student comments and questions have left me, for one, feeling more confident in discussing their essays with students. I have also been stimulated to continue to explore ways of describing texts and related issues. In other words, viewed as a piece of research of the kind described in the introduction of this paper, the course has spawned a number of questions for larger, more formal enquiries within a normative paradigm; for example:

The course was designed for a British context and for postgraduates. How different might such an awareness-raising course need to be if offered in other national contexts and/or to undergraduates?

The course is based on research findings that emphasise the role of theory in developing practice. How might one research the validity of that claim in relation to the course described in this paper? In other words, what would count as evidence in student texts of improvements related to learnings on the course?

What are the factors (e.g. level of English, kinds of problems) that might influence the extent to which individual students benefit from the course?

To conclude, the course in academic literacies is only a beginning. It represents reflection-in-progress. However, for the students who took it and their tutors it has been a challenging beginning. To turn to a very different kind of text for my final sentence, it has reminded us of the intellectual excitement to be gained if:

*... all experience is an arch wherethrough  
Gleams that untravelled world whose margin fades  
For ever and for ever when [we] move*

(Tennyson, Alfred, Lord, 1833, *Ulysses*)

## CHAPTER 5

# Cracking the codes anew: Writing about literature in England

### 5.1 Introduction

As in some other countries, such as South Africa and Kenya, higher education in the United Kingdom has been the site of huge changes in recent years. The changes can be broadly characterized as representing a move away from a highly exclusive system, in which the participation rate of eighteen- to twenty-year-olds was still only 15 percent in the mid-1980s, to a more open system in which over 30 percent of that age cohort had gained access by the mid-1990s. It can thus be said that, broadly speaking, higher education in Britain has undergone a transformation. If we borrow Trow's yardsticks, this transformation can be described as a move from an elite system (i.e. one that enrolls up to 15 percent of the age group) to a mass system (one that enrolls between 15 and 40 percent). The process of transformation is not yet complete, however. The current government would have the participation rate of eighteen- to twenty-year-olds leap to 50 percent in the near future, a rate that would conform to Trow's criteria for a universal system of higher education (i.e. a system that enrolls more than 40 percent of that age group).

While this concern to increase access might seem to bring the United Kingdom closer in ideology to the United States or France, where social equity is a primary aim, the situation in the United Kingdom is more complex. Because they are so recent, the moves toward a universal system are the subject of competing discourses. While many teachers in both schools and universities welcome the opening up of the universities to 'nonstandard' entrants as a democratic initiative, others view it as a 'dumbing down' of higher education. The former polytechnics, which concentrated on professional fields such as business studies and journalism, have been renamed universities, but popular discourse

refers to them as ‘new’ universities and maintains that ‘old’ universities are superior. Elite instincts and mass forms presently co-exist.

These changes in higher education provide the frame for my discussion of student writing in the transition from school to university. It is a frame I enlarge in the concluding section of this chapter when, looking to the future, I concentrate again on governmental goals and initiatives. Taking the photographic or filmic analogy further as a means of articulating the structure and purpose of this chapter, the opening and concluding parts of the chapter offer a long shot of the higher education scene in the United Kingdom, while in the intervening sections I seek to provide a close-up view of the difficulties of three first-year undergraduate writers in English literature courses. This close-up will not, however, reflect ‘elitist instincts’ since I do not regard the students’ academic difficulties as the inevitable outcome of the expansion of higher education. I aim instead to show that the primary problem lies in the gap between what is expected at school and what is required in the university.

While I have selected undergraduate essays that clearly were considered problematic by the markers, who gave them low grades, I would argue that the gap between school and university approaches presents problems for almost all first-year undergraduates when they write essays about literature. A marked parallel can in fact be drawn between many novice undergraduates’ experience of writing such essays and Turner’s anthropological conceptualization of the *rite de passage*, in which a separation from an ‘established set of cultural conditions’ is followed by a ‘liminal period’. Turner describes the state of the ‘passenger’ or ‘liminar’ during the *rite de passage* as ‘ambiguous, neither here nor there, betwixt and between all fixed points of classification.’ As the following comment indicates, it is a transition that can confront student ‘passengers’ with the unsettling realization that what they learned in the past has become mysteriously appropriate:

I got good marks for my essays about literature at school. I can’t understand why I am not doing well now [at university]. I always think I understand the essay questions but clearly I don’t. I am not the only one who is confused about what’s expected. In fact I would say that most of us are. (first-year undergraduate)

Giving novice undergraduates access to new understandings that they can then make visible in their essays is, however, no easy task. A number of researchers have shown that students do not often attach the required meanings to the terms

we teachers use in the essay questions we set and in our attempts to offer helpful guidance and feedback (see Hounsell, 1987; Mitchell, 1994; Lea & Street, 1998). My own experience as a tutor matches these research findings. Terms such as ‘analyze’, ‘discuss’, ‘argue’, and ‘give your personal response’, which I use in framing essay questions or in feedback, make sense to me in that they reflect my habitus (Bourdieu, 1990), my internalized ways of knowing and doing, but to many new university students in the humanities and social sciences, these conventional instructions are codes they cannot crack.

This failure on the part of the students represents a paradox, however. It is a failure deriving not from the unfamiliarity of the encodings but from their apparent familiarity – at school the students were also required to ‘argue’ and to give their ‘personal response’. Consequently, and unsurprisingly, they tend as undergraduates to assume a continuity between school and university essay-writing requirements, but it is a continuity that does not in fact exist.

This discontinuity within apparent continuity provides the central focus of this paper. Using sample essays placed in the ‘highest category’ (i.e. were awarded the highest marks) in the final school examination (General Certificate of Education: Advanced Level) in English literature, as well as the examiners’ comments on the essays, I first identify the meanings attached in practice to the principal criteria stated in the document. What I find is that these criteria – viz., ‘argument’ and ‘personal response’ – derive their meaning from a particular conception of literature and literary criticism that applies across all essay questions. I then turn to essays by first-year undergraduates following a course on (or in U.S. English, majoring in) literature in English – essays the tutors considered problematic. I suggest that the essays can be read as evidence of how the students have tried intuitively to make the essay questions correlate with approaches that brought success in the Advanced Level (A-level) examinations. But the unified conception of literature and literary criticism giving meaning to essay questions at A-level is no longer what is required. The undergraduate needs to be able to assess just which of many competing theoretical orientations a particular essay question may encode.

While discontinuity within apparent continuity is the central paradox that I aim to make visible in this essay, it is not the only incongruity I detect. There is also an irony that my own approach can be said to have constructed. In the concluding part of this chapter, I trace that irony to my initial failure to perceive

how my readings of the student essays do not do justice to the theoretical focus within which they are explicitly framed. Anticipating this later discussion, I briefly characterize that failure here in the following way: my readings of the students' essays rest on a narrow conception of a 'student essay' as a text to be assessed, rather than an indicator of individual understandings and ways forward. In looking again at features of the undergraduates' essays in the final part of this chapter, I introduce problems that keep the meanings of 'argument' and 'personal response' under review.

## 5.2 Theoretical Orientation

These comments imply a particular view of writing and of the writer, a view that derives largely from Kress (1995, 1996). Kress presents the writer as the producer of motivated signs (words, texts, or images). Motivated in this context does not, however, denote a Romantic view of the individual as spinning meanings from his or her own self-substance, nor that writers consciously control all aspects of what they write. It also excludes a view of the sign as fully motivated by the social environment. In short, Kress steers a pathway between the extremes of Romantic individualism on the one hand and social determinism on the other. For him, the individual is social, and writing remakes the forms and meanings that have been socially made. In adding detail to this broad perspective, Kress describes the writer as engaged in the remaking of available resources (which are of many different kinds—linguistic, social, cultural) out of her 'interest', a term that denotes the focusing (both intuitively and consciously) of many factors, including social and cultural histories and present social contexts.

When I apply the concept of motivation as interest to student writing, an essay (i.e. an essay assignment, in U.S. context) takes on the character of a writer's hypothesis that this is what is required by this essay question assigned in this course. This leads me, the reader, to form my own hypotheses as to why the essay is as it is and not otherwise, or to consider why the student writer has made the meanings he or she has. I do not, however, assume that I can identify all the reasons why the student has remade his or her knowledge, understandings, and experience in a particular way. In fact, the completeness or accuracy of my reading is not actually the issue. What is important is the style of

pedagogy suggested by the idea of a text as motivated. It emphasizes self-reflexivity on the part of student and tutor that is promoted by tutor-student dialogue grounded in the tutor's careful attempt to identify the assumptions and meanings in the student's essay and to consider their possible origin.

The view of writing thus sketched can clearly accommodate poststructuralist intertextuality as Barthes maintains it, especially the reminder that 'creativity' and 'originality' are not absolutes since textual meaning is tethered to the social by references to other texts. The concept of the 'motivated sign' also resonates with Bakhtin's perception of the 'life of the word' as 'contained in its transfer ... from one context to another context,' a process in which 'the word does not forget its own path and completely free itself from the power of those concrete contexts into which it has entered' (1984: 202). Consequently, Bakhtin argues that 'there are no voiceless words,' and any word cannot but speak to, hear, and understand meanings deriving from its past contexts. To these abstract formulations Kress adds a concern with text as testimony to writers' active engagement with their past learnings and experience, and with their perceptions of their role and writing task.

The theoretical framework thus outlined contains a brief comment on pedagogy. As that comment suggests, my view of writing and the writer finds its pedagogic corollary in Vygotskian perspectives on learning and, in particular, in the 'zone of proximal development' (ZPD). In writings about education, typified in Daniels's work, ZPD is usually interpreted as indicating the distance between the problem-solving abilities exhibited by a learner working alone, and that learner's problem-solving abilities when assisted by, or collaborating with, more experienced people. There are, however, other interpretations of ZPD, one of which Lave & Wenger (1996) refer to as the "cultural" definition. In this interpretation, ZPD is the 'distance between the cultural knowledge provided by the sociohistorical context-usually made accessible by instruction-and the everyday experience of individuals' (Lave & Wenger, 1996: 144).

This interpretation of ZPD can be used to refocus the betwixt and betweenness of the novice undergraduate's situation. To demonstrate the enlargement of meaning that then emerges, I return to the student comment quoted earlier: 'I always think I understand the essay questions but clearly I don't. I am not the only one who is confused.' Considered in light of a cultural interpretation of ZPD, this comment suggests that new undergraduates bring



with them approaches to writing about literature that have become so much a part of their everyday experience as essay writers that they cannot conceive of other possibilities. In other words, the students have been inducted into a particular way of writing essays about literature and are unaware of the theoretical underpinnings of their approach or of how it relates to other approaches. The task for me as teacher, then, is to move the students on from their largely intuitive view of what is required to what is actually required.

Setting this task within the theoretical framework just outlined, I suggest the following implications for my approach to student essays: while reading the individual essay as a ‘motivated sign’ is essential, it need not be the final stage in my thinking. It is just as important to consider an essay as indicating where a new approach might have its beginnings – i.e. indications of the student writer’s ZPD. To borrow Doris Lessing’s metaphor, I need to look for the cracks through which the new may flood. I attempt to do just that in my analyses of undergraduate essays.

### **5.3 Research into Argument**

‘Argument’ is a key term in the codes that confront the student writer both at school and in university. In the United Kingdom, this has been recognized in recent years in the granting of funding by the Leverhulme Trust for research into the teaching and learning of argument in school and university. This research is, however, based on a theoretical focus different from that outlined here. In fact, my theoretical orientation was developed out of my criticisms of the Leverhulme projects and takes on a sharper outline: when considered in relation to the view of argument developed in those projects.

The research to which I refer has been largely carried out by Mitchell (1994, 1996, 1997), Andrews (1995, 1997), and Riddle (1997). To provide a theoretical description that teachers in schools and higher education can translate into practice, these researchers draw on several different sources, particularly Toulmin’s elements (Toulmin, Rieke & Janik, 1984) – claim, warrants and grounds – from which they derive the underpinnings of all performances of argument. Their reliance on Toulmin coexists, however, with references to the Bakhtinian ‘dialogic’ (Mitchell, 1994, 1996; Andrews, 1997). Here I find an unacknowledged contradiction at the core of the research’s theoretical

framework. It derives from the fact that Toulmin and Bakhtin are incompatible. Bakhtin was primarily concerned with the historicity and specificity of performance. While he certainly did not reject the notion of systematicity, he treated systems as ‘existing only with respect to the subjective consciousness of members of some particular community’ (Clark & Holquist, 1984: 224). His focus was thus not on a given utterance significance within an underlying system, but rather on its ‘actual meaning’, which can only be ‘understood against the background of other concrete utterances on the same theme’ (Bakhtin, 1981: 281). This focus invites a consideration of the historicity and specificity of the meanings in students’ essays. But while the research into argument did not initially ignore learners’ meanings, in recent years more and more emphasis has been placed on framing an answer to the question ‘What is this thing called argument?’ (Mitchell, 1996). Since such a question implicitly attributes essential qualities to argument, its effect has been to move the research away from Bakhtin’s emphasis on the specificity and historicity of performance and toward Toulmin’s abstract categories. In the process, the learner has tended to disappear from view.

In obscuring the learner, the question ‘What is this thing called argument?’ implies a focus on pedagogy that is very different from the Vygotskian perspective I have suggested. In short, it invites a model of teaching and learning in which teachers transmit their knowledge and students receive what has been transmitted. The transmission model of pedagogy is currently in fashion in higher education in the United Kingdom, where the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) links it to a call for explicitness in the statement of course aims and criteria and in tutor feedback and guidance. While I recognize the need to aim at explicitness, however, I question the particular exemplar of explicitness in pedagogy that the Leverhulme research projects offer. It is an explicitness that invites the naming of parts by teacher and taught – this is a claim; that is the warrant, these are grounds. I seek here to propose instead a focus on explicitness as constituted by the lending of consciousness by teacher to undergraduate on the basis of the reading of the student’s essay as a sign that is ‘motivated’ by subjectivities formed at A-level, and in particular by the meaning attached to the primary criterion, argument.

What argument means in the context of A-level examiners’ practice is the main subject of the next part of this chapter. First, however, some background

needs to be provided concerning the role and place of A-level examinations in relation to university entrance.

## 5.4 University admissions: The role and place of A-level examinations

When a student proceeds to an A-level course (typically at age seventeen), he or she exchanges a broad curriculum with seven compulsory subjects for in-depth, narrowly specialized study in two or three subjects, studied over two years. Criticism of the narrowness of the A-level curriculum abounds, and some head teachers argue for the French-style *baccalauréat*. Yet most universities still regard A-levels as the ‘gold standard’, claiming that they provide an essential foundation for further academic study, and that the degree of specialization required in any one subject matches the level of academic achievement students in many other countries do not attain until at least the end of their first year at university. A-level students take high-stakes essay examinations at the end of their studies, assessed by an examining board, which largely determine their admission to university.

In the United Kingdom, all applications for full-time undergraduate programs of study are managed by the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), a government agency. Prospective students have to apply through UCAS in the early part of the second year of their two-year A-level course. In filling out the UCAS application form (at about age eighteen, typically), they can list up to six universities and/or courses. Although the applications are then sent to each of the universities the applicant has listed, students are admitted to a specific degree program (curriculum or major in the United States) and are expected to remain in that program. In this sense, a successful applicant is admitted to a degree program and not to a university. Consequently, it is the course admissions tutors within each discipline who decide the outcomes of all applications. In short, the A-level examinations loom large in the lives of students in their last two years at school, and their teachers give considerable time to preparing the students for the kinds of questions they are likely to encounter in the examinations.

How then does it come about that students who have been successful at A-level can be ‘confused about what’s expected’ in essays about literature at

university? I would suggest that the problem derives both from the nature of literature as a field of academic study and from the empirical realities imposed by the perceived need for a large-scale end-of-schooling public assessment system. The academic study of literature is characterized by many different approaches whose diversity is greater by far than that which typifies the study of science, where knowledge is more codified at the A-level. An A-level science course can thus serve as a strong foundation for university courses in science. A-level and first-year university courses in English literature, on the other hand, differ considerably in that familiarity with a diversity of critical perspectives is not required at A-level but is necessary for success even in first-year undergraduate courses. The reasons for this relate to the fact that at A-level, literature is a public examination subject taken by thousands of students who do not have access to well-stocked libraries where they might research different critical approaches to literature. In other words, to make English literature teachable and examinable across the country (and in some overseas centers too), the examination boards, which supervise the A-level examinations, have imposed a particular approach centering on the study of set literary texts in certain ways. But there may well be an even stronger reason for the approach adopted, since, as I indicate later, it can be said to suit larger educational aims within the British context.

Several different examining boards offer A-level examinations. Schools decide which board's examinations their students should take. In this chapter, I refer to the University of London Examinations and Assessment Council's (ULEAC's) examinations. In order to identify the view of literature and how to write about it (i.e. the kind of subjectivity) that is required for success in ULEAC's A-level examinations in English literature, I draw on the Teachers' Guide that ULEAC publishes. The stated general aim of the guide is to 'give straightforward advice with direct reference to the ULEAC English literature Syllabus at Advanced Level' (1994: 1). The guide contains samples of students' examination answers to particular questions together with the examiner's comments. It also includes samples of course work, since students can choose to submit a portfolio of essay assignments they have done on their own time in place of an examination. In such cases, the course work portfolio makes up 20 percent of the total assessment.

## 5.5 The examiners' criteria

The Teachers' Guide emphasizes two criteria – viz., 'argument' and 'personal response' or 'personal involvement'. At one level, the emphasis on the personal is, of course, examiner code for candidates' need to avoid the stock, prepackaged answer. But care is also taken to distinguish personal response from uninformed personal opinion. Personal response or involvement is in fact an elaboration of argument and its cognates, namely, 'critical analysis' and 'judgment'. The guide thus offers a Janus-faced view of literature: literature resonates with the reader's experience of life even while its formal devices and structures distance it from the world of everyday events and experience. Consequently, the guide advises teachers to help students appreciate that although empathizing with a character is desirable, it should be contained within an awareness of the character's particular function or role in articulating the themes of the text under discussion.

This focus on a literary text reflects a critical tradition of seeing a text as a self-contained object that represents a moral perspective. I outline that tradition shortly. For the moment, however, my aim is to describe the kind of subjectivity an A-level essay is expected to reflect. With that end in view, I consider two A-level essays in relation to the examiners' comments on each.

## 5.6 Writing about literature at A-level: Two essays

I have selected two examination essays that were each placed in the 'highest category' by the examining board and were therefore included in the *Teachers' Guide* as exemplars of the kind of approach the examiners expect. The first essay is on *Madame Bovary* (in translation) and *The Great Gatsby*. The second essay is on Sylvia Plath's poetry. I do not know the name or the gender of either writer and so I use androgynous pseudonyms, referring to the writer of the open-text examination essay on Sylvia Plath's poetry as Jo and to the writer of the course work essay on *Madame Bovary* and *The Great Gatsby* as Sam. Following feminist practice, however, I use the pronoun *she* and the possessive adjective *her* for both writers.

In Jo's and Sam's essays, as in the guide's other exemplary essays, 'argument' and 'personal response' are realized in the description and assessment of a character's, or a poem's, moral and emotional qualities, and in

particular in the perception of ambiguity and paradox. In fact, the examination question on Plath's poetry invites attention to ambiguity. It reads:

It has been suggested that even at its most destructive Plath's poetry is always counterbalanced with tenderness. Have you found this to be so?

Jo responds to the question in the way intended: she is quick to see that agreement with the given statement is what is actually required. Thus, after initially giving an obvious and brief example of tenderness, she addresses the paradox of tenderness in destructiveness:

However, Plath's underlying tenderness is most evident in one of her most vicious poems, *Daddy*, perhaps reflecting her ambivalent love/hate attitude towards her father:

Daddy I have had to kill you  
You died before I had time

In these two lines the poet's wish to murder her father is combined with her regret and her grief over his death in a startling, contradictory couple of lines.

This paradox of love within hate is the dominant theme of Jo's essay and is the note on which she concludes her discussion of *Daddy*, the poem to which she gives most attention. She writes:

However much Plath would like to hate her father, ... she is unable to do so and despite the increasingly vicious triumph of the last stanza ... the final line of the poem reads more like an acknowledgement of her own defeat than a victory.

In Sam's essay, too, argument is realized in the elucidation of a paradox. Her opening sentence states that her essay is about the "tragedy" of two characters – *Gatsby* and *Emma Bovary* – who could 'hardly be more different at first glance,' but who 'beneath the surface have much in common in their inner worlds of romantic fantasy: both are simultaneously sustained and destroyed by their dreams.' In short, as in Jo's essay, argument is a matter of looking below the surface of events and actions, and implicitly excluding simple moral categorizations. This is clearly demonstrated in the final paragraph of Sam's essay in which she emphasizes the ironic similarities and contrasts she finds in the characters of *Emma Bovary* and *Gatsby*:

They are both tremendously romantic figures because of their powers of imagination and dreaming. Emma's tragedy is that she is a fantastically sensual

woman who is capable of inspiring great love, but she has not grasped the true nature of love and of compromise. Gatsby's tragedy is that this most hopeful and most loving of men has surrendered himself to a woman unworthy of his trust and devotion.

In their assessment of character or feelings, Jo and Sam both adopt a judgmental mode of discourse that reflects a particular set of values. Their statements gather authority from assertive third-person linguistic structures. Emphasizing a paradox once again, for example, Jo informs the reader that Plath's destructiveness is actually a virtue in that it is a mark of her courageousness:

Although undoubtedly some of Plath's more rational poetry contains undercurrents of tenderness, there are some poems which hit the reader with their lack of it. In some ways, however, this is one of Plath's strengths – she never shirks a completely bitter sentiment. (p. 61)

Sam likewise confidently categorizes Emma and Gatsby. This is graphically illustrated in statements in which, writing in the third person, as throughout the essay, she passes judgment with an air of authority:

Emma's fantasy is self centred whereas Gatsby needs to give love as much as to receive it. Emma's love is selfish, Gatsby's, however, is entirely unselfish. But despite the elusive qualities of their fantasy worlds neither Gatsby nor Emma is an idle dreamer. (p. 68)

As these examples show, Jo and Sam implicitly ascribe an unquestionable validity to their judgments and to the moral norms on which those judgments are based. This in turn sheds further light on what the examiners mean when they ask for a personal response, the criterion the examiner picks out as particularly important when commenting on Jo's essay:

The question makes a number of quite specific demands, ... but more significantly it signals ('Have you found ...') that what is being sought here are personal involvement and personal response. (p. 62)

Jo interprets the question in a way that meets the examiner's expectations. She perceives, no doubt intuitively rather than consciously, that 'personal involvement' and 'personal response' signal that the examiners require an interpretation based finally on values that can be assumed to be shared by the

reader. In short, both Jo and Sam treat the literary text as a comment on life's complexity that they explicate for a reader inhabiting the same moral world.

The assumption that the reader occupies the same universe of values is reinforced by the absence of detailed analysis of how the texts under discussion create their effects. Although Jo quotes extensively from Plath's poems, for example, she tends to gloss the lines, embedding the quotations in her interpretation, as in:

Although the poet seems to attach blame to both her father –

No less a devil for that, no not

Any less the black man who

Bit my pretty red heart in two –

and her husband, she also acknowledges her own capability –

If I killed one man I've killed two

Sam similarly tends to use quotation as an elaboration of her interpretation:

Emma's first attempt at securing herself a reality of eternal romantic love ironically contributes still further to her need for dreams, for the happiness derived from her marriage to Charles falls horribly short of expectations. He is incapable of fulfilling her fantasies.

'Before the wedding she had believed herself in love. But not having attained the happiness that should have resulted from that love she now fancied she must have been mistaken. And Emma wondered what exactly was meant in life by the words bliss, passion, ecstasy which had looked so beautiful in books.'

## 5.7 Writing about literature at A-level: Some general conclusions

What general conclusions might be drawn from this discussion? Significantly, Jo and Sam each reveal a no doubt largely intuitive awareness of paradoxical assumptions clustering around the conception of literature and literary criticism set out in the *Teachers' Guide*. They implicitly subscribe to the view that literature both is and is not about life, and that a personal response both is and is not personal in that it has to be transformed into a general comment within a shared community of values while not ceasing to be an individual interpretation. They demonstrate this process in an assumption of authority reflected in two habits: their use of the third person and their use of general themes that sweep



up the text into comments about thought and feeling—comments that eschew simple either/ors, replacing them with the identification of ambiguity and paradox.

But while the generalizations universalize attitudes and feelings articulated in the text, they also throw into relief the particularities of the text. This is a critical process Connor describes as the use of examples for their ‘exemplarity’ (1993). He contrasts ‘exemplarity’ with ‘exemplification’, which denotes the subordination of the example to the delineation of certain concepts or principles. This is a distinction that, as I shortly show, illuminates the nature of the difference between the essay questions set at A-level and those that students are required to address in an undergraduate course.

Connor links exemplarity to practical criticism, a method of analysis associated mainly with I.A. Richards. Practical criticism (which is also the title of the book Richards published in 1929) is the British counterpart of American New Criticism. In their emphasis on the study of texts largely in isolation from their sociopolitical, biographical, and literary-historical background, the A-level students’ essays, and the examiners’ comments, do in fact echo the primary principles of practical criticism. Richards shared with F.R. Leavis an insistence that the purpose of literature is to teach about life and to transmit humane values that transcend time and place. This too is a shaping and strongly visible influence on the study of literary texts at A-level. Leavis and Richards both began teaching at Cambridge University in the 1920s and came to represent what has been termed the ‘moral intrinsic’ approach to literary texts. Birch (1989: 16) summarizes this approach:

For this method of reading the reader does not need to know about the situations in which the text was produced, the historical/economic contexts, or the biographical contexts of the writer. It is basically a criticism that produces an interpretation free of any contextual influences. ... The object of analysis is not the specific text, but rather the phenomenon of subjectivity – that which makes us human.

In short, the reader needs to be a ‘sound judge of value’ (Richards, 1929: 87). Birch makes some harsh criticisms of the moral intrinsic approach, using excerpts from a paper by Cleanth Brooks, an American New Critic, as an example of the shortcomings he perceives in the approach. The following lines are part of a longer passage, which Birch quotes to exemplify Brooks’ mode of criticism. Brooks is referring to Faulkner’s poem ‘The Marble Faun’:

How much more brilliant is Faulkner's account of how the idiot found a 'brown creep of moisture in a clump of alder and beech' and scooped out a basin for it 'which now at each return of light stood full and clear and leaf by leaf repeating until (cow and idiot) lean and interrupt the green reflections. (qtd. in Birch, 1989: 75)

Birch's purpose in quoting these lines is to accuse Brooks of 'expecting a series of quotations to function as critical comment.' When I now look back at Jo's and Sam's essays, I see that they can be said to use quotations in the same way. The stance they adopt does in fact resemble that of the professional practitioners of moral intrinsic criticism, who assume a reader crediting them with privileged access to the meanings in the text. It is a stance that assumes that 'ultimately we can talk of ... texts only in so far as we can talk with them' (Carter, 1983: 384).

Earlier I suggested that certain real-world constraints cause the A-level study of English literature to focus on the study of set texts from a particular critical perspective. Now that I have traced that perspective to its source, however, I perceive another, even stronger reason. Leavis, Richards, and the American New Critics all argue that literature has a morally educative role that distinguishes it from other uses of language. As Barry points out, this view of the educative powers of literature has deep roots in the past. A brief account of its history, however, will reveal the political nuances that have been attached to literature's educative role.

## 5.8 The political history of the moral intrinsic approach

In 1840, F.D. Maurice was appointed professor of English at King's College, University of London. He was convinced that literature connects the reader to what is 'fixed and enduring'. But Maurice also regarded English literature as the expression of Englishness. Though he recognized that it was a middle-class Englishness, he believed that a potential 'political agitator' who studied English literature would feel 'his nationality to be a reality' (qtd. in Barry, 1995: 13). He thus considered the study of English literature to be a way of giving people a 'stake in maintaining the status quo without any redistribution of wealth.'

This view of literature's potential role as a socially cohesive, antirevolutionary force continued to be prominent in education in the United Kingdom into the 1980s and 1990s. It has been at the center of debates about

which texts should be studied in schools. In his 1986 Arnold Palmer lecture, for example, Kenneth Baker, then secretary of state for education in England and Wales, echoed Maurice's perspective when he referred to the English language and English literature as 'our greatest asset as a nation ... the essential ingredient of the Englishness of England' (qtd. in Donald, 1989: 14). Baker's narrow conception of 'Englishness' not only ignores Wales, but it also reflects a blindness to the multicultural composition of the population of England. Opposition comes from academics and educationists such as Green and Medway who have sought to raise awareness of the cultural politics of English teaching. In discussions of classroom actualities, however, much of the debate concentrates only on the selection of set texts. 'Englishness' and the canon of 'great literature' are at the center of this debate, with opponents arguing for a broader view of literature and the replacement of 'English literature' with 'literature in English'. To a certain but definitely limited extent there has been a broadening of this kind. The ULEA A-level syllabus now includes works by U.S. and commonwealth writers, and translations are also permissible, as we have seen.

This concern with the choice of set texts, however, tends to hide from view the continuing presence in the A-level examination of the liberal humanist conception of literature. As the essays in the 'highest category' show, students need to adopt the role of a moral intrinsic critic and to write about human actions and feelings whether the genre is poetry or fiction. In short, they are expected to conform to the very view of literature that the academic study of literature in higher education, with its emphasis on theory, has come to problematize. The transition from school to university thus requires students to perceive and unsettle their assumptions if they are to succeed.

## 5.9 Writing about Literature at University

Having outlined the characteristics of the best essays about literature at A-level, I now move to the university. Here we university teachers' statements of criteria are likely to sound familiar to novice undergraduates in that we tend to say we expect critical analysis, argument, and a personal response, as do A-level teachers. But something different is actually required: viz., the ability to handle the theoretical diversity of literary criticism. It was perception of how

unprepared most students are that led Barry to produce a book titled *Beginning Theory*. This introduction offers a summary of the situation in which novice undergraduates tend to find themselves on courses in English studies:

If you are coming to literary theory soon after taking courses in such subjects as media studies, communications studies, or sociolinguistics, then the general ‘feel’ of the new theoretical approaches to literature may well seem familiar. You will already be ‘tuned in’ to the emphasis on ideas, which is one of their characteristics; you will be undaunted by the use of technical terminology, and unsurprised by their strong social and political interests. If on the other hand, you took a ‘straight’ A Level literature ... course with the major emphasis on set books, then ... initially you will have the problem of getting on the wave length of these different ways of looking at literature. (Barry, 1995: 6)

To illustrate the problems that students writing about literature can encounter on moving from school to university, I discuss three undergraduate essays, since the essay continues to be seen as an essential component in the assessment process. In English, as in most arts and humanities subjects, essay tends to mean an extended piece of writing drafted and redrafted over months, intended to give students the opportunity for in-depth reflection and critical thinking leading to the construction of an argument. All three essays were considered inadequate by the tutors. But while I consider that judgment just in terms of what was required, my reading of the students’ essays is an attempt to identify what each student is doing and to suggest the source of the approach that each student adopts. My analysis reveals that the students assume a continuity with A-level ways of writing about literary texts, whereas something very different is actually required. To show that discontinuity between A-level and undergraduate essays, I preface the discussion of each essay with a brief account of the approach reflected in the essay title (essay prompt or topic assigned), each of which represents a different critical perspective on literature. In keeping with the Vygotskian perspective outlined earlier, I conclude my discussion of each essay by suggesting ways in which each student might be helped to move on as a writer of essays about literature.

I had not taught these students, who were in fact studying at another university; nor did I interview their teachers. These omissions were, in fact, the product of a deliberate decision to concentrate exclusively on the students’ texts. I was thus in the same position as most internal or external examiners.

### 5.9.1 Jack's essay: The essay question and its meaning

Jack's essay addresses the following essay question:

Write an essay on the accumulation of evidence-the significance given to 'clues' – in an example of early crime fiction.

This essay question is clearly different from the questions of the A-level essays discussed earlier. Here there is no explicit demand for personal response, nor is there an emphasis on character or feeling. What is required is encoded in 'essay' and in the abstractions 'accumulation', 'evidence', and 'significance', while the quotation marks around 'clues' turn this word into an abstraction too. In this context, 'crime fiction' denotes a distinctive genre in which the relation between fiction and reality is of central theoretical importance. The difference between this essay question and those of the A-level essays is contained in Connor's distinction between 'exemplarity' and 'exemplification'. Although the student is asked to concentrate on only one literary text, he is required to focus on how the text exemplifies concepts rather than on the exemplary of the text or parts of it.

Jack chose to write about Poe's Dupin tales. Poe uses many of the motifs that are still to be found in crime fiction: a murder in a locked room, the innocent suspect, a detective with superior reasoning powers. What the essay question suggests, however, is that such details are not important in themselves. A student who read the essay question in the manner expected might concentrate rather on the tales as presenting a theory of how detection works in a fictional world. In other words, he would focus not on the details of the evidence itself but on the manner of its discovery and interpretation. Such a discussion could lead finally into a consideration of conceptions of 'truth' in crime fiction. This is the kind of analysis pointed to by, for example, Van Leer in his paper on Poe (1993). Jack, however, seems not to have consulted any critical works, which is in keeping with the A-level emphasis on personal response to set literary texts. He thus concentrates on narrative detail and in particular on character and theme – the focus of attention in A-level questions on literature.

#### Jack's Approach

Jack begins his essay by stating that he has chosen to discuss Edgar Allan Poe's *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*, concentrating on 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue.' He then states that the police are baffled by the available clues. In the

next paragraph, he introduces the argument on which his essay is based – the significance of the clues lies in the light they shed on Dupin’s abilities. Referring to Dupin as the hero of the tale, Jack recounts how he uses his superior analytic ability to solve the crime that had been baffling the prefect of police:

The hero, C. Auguste Dupin, defeats the Prefect of Police ‘in his own castle’ by solving a seemingly insolvable crime. Dupin and his companion read about the extraordinary murders of Madame L’Espanaye and her daughter, Mademoiselle Camille L’Espanaye. The newspaper report gives all the clues that have been found and are dumbfounding the police. The police’s inability to solve the murder enables Dupin’s ‘peculiar analytic ability’ to come into play. The report provides us with evidence from the scene of the crime, including the confusing, conflicting evidence of different foreigners each claiming to have heard a European voice, different from their own, shouting out at the time of the crime. Nearly everything in the room is presented as a clue to the murderer.

Jack then turns to the obvious clue the police overlooked but that Dupin identifies:

Dupin visits the apartment and begins to unravel the mystery. He refuses to believe that there is no means of escape. All doors and windows seem securely locked and the chimney is too small for escape. It is astonishing that the police did not pursue the investigation of all means of escape further and it is their failure to do so which makes Dupin’s success seem astonishing. Unsurprisingly Dupin finds a concealed spring and a broken nail which made the window look locked from the inside even when it had been closed from the outside.

Jack concludes this discussion of *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* by commenting on the construction of the tale. He focuses on how the presentation of the clues emphasizes Dupin’s brilliance :

Dupin presents the reader with each of the clues separately and how he formed a suspicion of who the murderer is but he will not reveal this. Instead the narrator (and the reader) must guess at how the clues link together to form a solution, again creating an impression of Dupin’s brilliance in the reader’s mind.

Jack then rounds off the essay by emphasizing the contrast between Dupin’s brilliance and the police’s ineptness:

The clues should have provided enough evidence to give the police a lead and this allows Dupin to carry out ordinary police procedure successfully and so to heighten our admiration for his ‘peculiar analytic ability’.

As these excerpts show, Jack concentrates on the fact of Dupin’s ‘peculiar analytic ability’ far surpassing that of the police. He treats the tale as an account of battle and victory in which there is an ironic twist – Dupin is judged stupid by the police, who are supposed to be adept at solving crimes, but he finally emerges as the real ‘hero’ in a contest of minds. This reading of the tale leads Jack into significant omissions from the point of view of the university tutor. He fails to mention the philosophical discussion that frames *The Murder in the Rue Morgue*. Nor does he critically explore the precise nature of the difference between the police’s concentration on what can be observed and Poe’s primary concern with concepts that organize what is observed – concepts such as predictability, unpredictability, and probability, which have a direct bearing on the significance of ‘clues’.

### **Continuities with the A-level approach**

Jack’s tutor did not regard this essay as deserving of a pass mark. The essay’s shortcomings take on a different appearance, however, if we consider Jack’s essay in light of A-level requirements for success. Jack has in fact translated the essay question into a familiar A-level approach, in which the emphasis is on the kind of coherence given to narrative detail by a character in his relation to a unifying theme, which in this case is presented as the victory of analytical brilliance over ignorance. Like the two A-level candidates whose essay I have briefly discussed, Jack makes confident pronouncements in the third person. While the essay would probably not have been placed in the ‘highest category’ at A-level since the details of the action in places submerge the theme being traced, the conception of literature and literary criticism is basically the same as that reflected in Jo’s and Sam’s essays. In fact, so influenced is Jack by a view of literature as a comment on life that he overlooks the implausibility of Dupin’s actions and of the events, an implausibility that the assigned question implicitly suggested he analyze.

Jack has, however, almost certainly not drawn only on assumptions developed at A-level. While crime fiction is not a genre in A-level examination syllabi, the theme of clever detective outwitting authority figures is one with

which Jack is surely familiar from other detective stories in print or on film. Poe is, in fact, often referred to as the inventor of the detective story (Stern, 1957), and, as I mentioned earlier, many of the motifs in his tales are to be found in the stories of those who came after him. Jack had encountered the Sherlock Holmes stories during his course and was probably also familiar with the film versions in which Holmes demonstrates his superior analytic ability. In reading Poe's tales, Jack may also have heard echoes of popular TV crime fiction such as *Inspector Morse* or *Frost* in which the protagonist emerges as more insightful than doubting superiors or colleagues. These kinds of echoes are, however, precisely those to which Jack now needs to turn a deaf ear. The essay question that confronts him demands a different template for argument and a different subjectivity. In other words, whereas in the A-level context and argument or personal response signaled the interpretation of the particularities of meaning and effect in a text, now the given essay question requires the reader to place himself at a greater distance from the text; to stand back, as it were, so that the text can be seen to exemplify a particular position or positions in a theoretical debate about the nature of literature and of criticism.

### Helping Jack move on

How might Jack be helped to move on? The brief written feedback at the end of the essay reads: 'You give a lot of detail but you do not do much analysis of its significance in relation to the essay [question].' This comment seems fair though uninformative from a student's perspective. Oddly enough, what Jack needs to do to be successful is to adopt the focus on evidence that Poe favors – i.e. he needs to see evidence as not residing mainly in the particulars observed but in the categories that organize those particulars. Jack's interpretation of the significance of the clues is not implausible from the critical perspective that he adopts. In fact, it is a reading suggested by Stern's argument that *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* marked the birth of the detective story. The attempt to move Jack on could thus include encouraging him to perceive the theory within his approach to the tale. This could then lead into a discussion of the different critical approach implied by the question and how it focuses on more than theme and character.

A starting point starrng might be found within the 'lot of detail' that Jack provides. There are places in Jack's essay that imply an awareness of the



implausibilities of the tale. Jack’s use of the term ‘hero’, for example, and his choice of ‘unsurprisingly’ in the sentence beginning ‘Unsurprisingly Dupin finds a concealed spring’ suggest a perception that this is fiction and not a slice of life. A discussion of these word choices could open out into talk about concepts such as probability and predictability and so to the difference between fiction and life. This would throw into relief the significance of those parts of the tale that Jack overlooked.

The next two essays I discuss address essay questions that reflect a dominant focus in contemporary literary theory – the relation between a literary text and extra-text cultural and political issues. This focus challenges the liberal humanism that went unquestioned at A-level. As I show next, however, neither of the essay writers indicates an awareness of that challenge.

### **5.9.2 Jessica’s essay: The essay question and the politics of English**

The course tutor provided the following essay question:

How useful is the term ‘post-colonial’ as a critical concept? In your answer refer to at least two texts.

The inclusion in university English courses of questions relating to postcolonialism seems pertinent in postimperial Britain. In that historical context, attention to postcolonialism marks the redrawing of the boundaries of English as an academic field of study – a redrawing that denotes an awareness of the injustice and ethno•centrism of past omissions. The link between those omissions and issues of power is summed up by Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin (1989: 3), who state that the ‘formation of English Studies involved the denial of the value of the “peripheral”, the “marginal” and the “uncanonised” since the study of English and the growth of Empire proceeded from a single ideological climate’ which established a ‘privileging norm’.

While the term ‘postcolonial’ originally denoted a challenge to the powerful impact of that privileging norm, it has acquired different significances over time and has itself become the subject of debate. In an attempt to offer students a map of the territory, Barry suggests three phases in postcolonial literature, which he summarizes, rather too neatly, as ‘adopt’, ‘adapt’, and ‘adept’. The ‘adopt’ phase was marked by the assumption that colonialist models of writing were universal and thus to be unquestioningly accepted. The ‘adapt’ phase involved adapting

European forms to the subject matter of the formerly colonized, while the ‘adept’ phase represents a ‘declaration of cultural independence in which writers remake the form[s] to their own specification’ (1995: 195).

But the essay question Jessica addresses looks beyond these neat categorizations to the complexities and problems relating to ‘postcolonial’ as a critical concept, a phrase clearly indicating that – to borrow Hall’s (1996) distinction – it is the epistemological and not the chronological meanings that are the intended issue. These meanings offer a rich field of possibilities since postcolonial is now a ‘contested space (Hall, 1996). Moreover, when considered in relation to literary criticism, ‘postcolonial’ raises questions concerning the very nature of a literary text.

### **Jessica’s approach**

Jessica is, however, unfamiliar with the theoretical and political debates surrounding the concept of ‘postcolonial’. In place of a detailed discussion of the usefulness of the term as a critical concept, she begins with a definition in which ‘postcolonial’ is what comes after ‘colonialism’. She writes first of colonialism:

‘Colonialism’ means the domination by the British Empire over smaller colonies and continents. Britain had an empire, which was controlled by the ruling classes. Millions of people had a new religion forced upon them, their literary works were destroyed, their way of life eradicated.

She then states that postcolonialism, by contrast, ‘represents the coming to an end of colonisation imposed by the West.’

In turning to literature, Jessica treats ‘postcolonial’ as marking the kinds of content that became the primary concern of writers in the newly independent former colonies. She draws a line between colonial and postcolonial periods of history, stating that in postcolonial times, the oppressed were able for the first time to give an account of their historical experience and suffering. Using George Lamming’s *In the Castle of my Skin* and Joan Riley’s *The Unbelonging* as her two texts, she writes:

*In the Castle of my Skin* and *The Unbelonging* could not have been written during the colonial era. Firstly the colonisers’ information was known to be ‘correct’, and to critically challenge it would have caused a confrontation with the dominant

institutions. ... To highlight racial issues, breakdown in social services, to acknowledge the existence of slavery, black history and the repressive environment – such information would have caused an uproar in the colonial era.

This quotation lists the themes that Jessica finds particularized in the experience of communities and individuals in both *In the Castle of my Skin* and *The Unbelonging*. Discussing *In the Castle of my Skin* first, she singles out Lamming's concern with the slave trade in its effect on the colonized:

Slaves were taken to Jamaica, Antigua, Grenada and Barbados. Lamming describes a calamitous situation. Individuals 'trying to live, some die ... families fall to pieces and many a brother never again sees his sister nor father his son.' Here Lamming is giving an accurate historical account of the slave trade.

Turning next to *The Unbelonging*, Jessica focuses on Riley's treatment of racial issues as represented by the experience of the novel's main character, Hyacinth:

*The Unbelonging* by Joan Riley discusses racial issues from the 1950s to the 1960s ... Riley raises issues relating to the non-exposure of black students to black history. Hyacinth who was placed in care due to the abuse she suffered at home at the hands of her father had a stereotypical view of blacks. She lived in a white environment and she received no education that addressed blackness or black issues while she was in care.

Jessica then draws the two writers' concerns together, stating that both focus on the effects of displacement:

Both authors highlight the trauma of displacement. In *In the Castle of My Skin* displacement is caused by slavery. In *The Unbelonging* displacement for Hyacinth was caused by economic hardship. Hyacinth had to leave Jamaica at the age of eleven at an age when she most needed care but was then exposed to the harsh reality of emigration.

Jessica's essay bears several traces of the approaches that are required at A-level. Like the A-level candidates, Jo and Sam, she focuses on a central unifying theme, in this instance the suffering caused by colonialism. Like them, too, she writes in the third person, confidently making her points. She thus implies a view of argument as the articulation of a focus that is supported by but at the same time illuminates the particularity of the text under discussion. In this instance, however, the essay question requires a different conception of argument. Jessica is not required to choose one meaning of 'postcolonial' and then to

apply it to at least two texts, but rather to discuss the issues embedded in the concept and debate its range of possible meanings. In fact, Jessica inadvertently demonstrates what Dirlik (1994) claims to be a danger attached to the chronological meaning of postcolonial. She seeks to universalize the postcolonial experience, editing out difference, complexity, and the transnational, relying on the binarism of 'colonial' versus 'postcolonial'. This is unsurprising since she seems to have assumed that, as at A-level, she need concentrate only on set literary texts. The essay contains no evidence that Jessica has read any of the critical discussions of the meaning of 'postcolonial'.

In one respect, however, Jessica's essay represents a marked departure from the criteria reflected in A-level essays. As I pointed out earlier, the A-level student is expected to appreciate that literature both is and is not about life. Jessica, however, obliterates that doubleness of perspective. In choosing a chronological definition 'postcolonial' and texts that are strongly and avowedly autobiographical, she is drawn into focusing on *In the Castle of My Skin* and *The Unbelonging* as simply offering a view of how things were. In treating the texts as historical documents, she tends to present narrative details as if they are simply factual evidence to be flatly stated. Furthermore, the details she selects all emphasize the one view of colonization that fits her chosen theme – viz., colonization as the cause of 'trauma' in the colonized. Thus she fails to comment on the nostalgia for the colonial past that coexists with Lamming's condemnation of colonialism and gives his novel its complexity and subtle emotional character. Neither does she move beyond content into a discussion of the novels' use of nonstandard English and the political significance of that choice.

### **Helping Jessica move on**

How then might Jessica be helped to make progress? Like Jack, Jessica has provided an answer to the given question. As in Jack's case, the problem is that the answer relies on an inappropriate paradigm. There are, however, points in Jessica's essay that touch critical perspectives that her tutor could take up and explore with her; in particular the relation between literature and its historical and sociopolitical contexts. Jessica explicitly attaches critical purpose to her use of 'postcolonial'. For her it represents a critical focus on the past, a reevaluation. But she confines reevaluation to a discussion of the content of the novels,

treating them as historical documents and failing to comment on the theory of literature and criticism they reevaluate by example. As in the case of Jack's essay, a way into relevant literary theory could begin with Jessica's own text – that is, with a discussion of how a postcolonial perspective on a text would reevaluate the A-level assumptions on which her essay is based. Such a discussion could start from Jessica's construction of a unifying theme across two texts from different countries and would seek to indicate how she implicitly relies on the very emphasis on the universal and on the exclusion of difference that 'postcolonial' seeks to subvert.

A more immediate starting point, however, might be found in an incompatibility within the essay of which Jessica seems unaware, but which could become the source of new insights. I refer to Jessica's manner of contextualizing quotations from Lamming's novel. The following lines are a good example of the clashing perspectives that result:

Families fall to pieces and many a brother never sees his sister nor father his son.  
Here Lamming is giving an accurate historical account of the slave trade.

'Historical account' fails to capture the feelings that the evocatively rhythmical quotation communicates. Yet behind that failure may lie an important issue that Jessica may be intuitively groping toward. The clash of styles may point to an as yet unformulated awareness that while in an A-level approach to the text Lamming's poetic style might well be taken to suggest the universality of the feelings presented, the 'postcolonial', by contrast, seeks to highlight the historicity and specificity of the suffering described.

There is, of course, a glaring omission in Jessica's essay. She has not referred to 'postcolonial' as a critical concept leading to a reinterpretation and reevaluation of novels long part of school and first-year university syllabi. *Mansfield Park* is such a text, with Mr. Bertram's ownership of estates in the West Indies now being treated as significant in ideological readings of the novel. Had Jessica extended her focus beyond the marginalized and silenced people depicted in the novels to silences in the literary criticism of those novels, she would have got closer to the issue around the usefulness of 'postcolonial' as a critical concept. And yet, in asking myself what might have motivated her selection of, and particular approach to, two novels from the edge, I came

eventually to significant omissions in my own approach. But that is a subject for the final part of this chapter.

I turn next to the third essay selected for discussion. It is by a female student whom I call Diana. I focus on an aspect of Diana's essay that distinguishes it from all those discussed so far. Jo's and Sam's essays show that A-level students can be highly successful without explicit recourse to published literary criticism of the set texts. Jack and Jessica both seem to have assumed that undergraduate essays also need refer only to the works of fiction under discussion. Diana has, however, drawn explicitly and obviously on a particular critical text. Her use of that text does not, however, raise issues concerning plagiarism. On the contrary what is significant about Diana's essay is how little she has got of what she so clearly saw as relevant in the critical text. Her essay thus suggests that we should not assume that referring novice undergraduates to the critics will necessarily help them to do what an essay question requires.

### 5.9.3 Diana's essay question

The essay question set by the tutor was:

Discuss the social or psychological meaning of an early crime fiction text including in your analysis a close analysis of form and meaning.

There are echoes here of A-level essay questions in that this question clearly calls for detailed attention to one text. Diana chose to write about the social meaning of Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*. Students selecting that novel were referred to Tamar Heller's *Dead Secrets: Wilkie Collins and the Female Gothic*. This critical text contains a chapter on *The Woman in White*, which in fact fleshes out a possible social meaning. Diana explicitly refers to that chapter in her essay, but she transforms it in ways that echo what was expected at A-level. In order to highlight the nature of Diana's transformations, I preface my discussion of her essay with a brief account of Heller's approach.

#### Heller's approach: A demonstration of feminist criticism

Heller gives the reader a clear statement of her focus:

I am concerned ... with Collins' gender politics. But I place my analysis of Collins' representations of gender in a more fully historicized context. In examining Collins' representations of gender through the female Gothic plot I link the relation of

Collins' generic choices to his position as a male writer in the Victorian literary marker. (Heller, 1992: 4)

As 'gender politics' and 'representations' suggest, Heller approaches Collins's novel as a signifying practice with a political purpose and not as the kind of exploration of moral complexities found in 'intrinsic criticism' (Birch, 1989) and featured prominently in A-level essays. 'Gender' links the text to its ideological context – that is, to the attitudes and beliefs reflected in the unequal social positioning of men and women in Victorian society. Heller's critique views literary texts in Foucault's perspective, as dealing in discourses that reflect socially constructed differences in power. From this perspective, generic forms such as the female Gothic become a political issue; they carry contestable meanings relating to differences in social identities and so in power.

A corollary of the political focus is that a literary text might be said either to naturalize a socially constructed difference in power, or to challenge received views to make a difference in the world. Heller chooses the latter of these possibilities. She emphasizes the ideological challenge that Collins mounts, giving detailed attention to his liberal views and showing how he uses the female Gothic to draw his readers' attention to the unjust position and plight of women in Victorian society. She concludes, however, that Collins presents a flawed critique in that he finally breaks with the Gothic novel's support for female subversiveness. Like most of Collins's novels, *The Woman in White* ends, she states, with the 'containment of female power and subversion' (Heller, 1992: 8).

Heller is, of course, also engaged in gender politics as she analyzes Collins's views on the plight of women. She writes from a particular ideological position that she does not, however, hold up to reader scrutiny. That position is evident not only in her criticism of Collins's containment of women's subversiveness, but also in her choices within the genre of literary criticism. Through her citations, for example, she locates herself in a body of feminist writing – that is, in a particular committed discourse community – that seeks to encourage resistance to the representation of gender and its societal meanings as they pertain to women. The citations refer to writing from different periods in history (e.g. Wollstonecraft; Showalter). In this way, Collins's representation of women's inequality in Victorian England is given a historical continuity and

drawn into an alliance with late-twentieth-century gender politics and a commitment to female subversiveness.

This alliance between then and now is also indicated by the significance Heller attaches to the role of writing in *The Woman in White*. The control of the signifier and the silencing of women's voices are central feminist issues, as Olsen and Miller have demonstrated. Heller also takes up those issues. She points to the fact that, while the story is written by several of the characters, it is a man, Walter Hartright, who edits the text and who finally has the last word in which he describes the active and potentially subversive Marian Halcombe as 'our good angel'. Feminist criticism is also woven into the lexis of Heller's text, most notably in the reference to women as blank pages to be 'inscribed' by men, and in nouns that – to borrow Bakhtin's metapho (1981) – carry the 'voices' of their use in other contexts, such as resistance, subversiveness, identity.

### **Diana's approach: A demonstration of transformations**

Diana refers explicitly to *Dead Secrets*. But while she focuses on gender inequalities in *The Woman in White*, she does so from a theoretical perspective that is very different from Heller's. Echoing the approach required at A-level, Diana begins with the statement that 'the primary theme [of *The Woman in White*] is the gender theme.' She then breaks that theme down into other versions of the same theme: she refers to women's 'lack of power' in Victorian England; to 'the helplessness of women'; and to 'the greater social power of the male'. She particularizes these abstractions by linking them to details of the plot. She says, for example,

Throughout the novel the lack of power women have over their own destiny is constantly conveyed to the reader. Laura has no legal power over her marriage to Sir Perceval. She must submit herself to him in order to obey another male, her father, who the reader discovers has committed his daughter on his deathbed to the marriage with Sir Perceval. Thus Laura must dismiss her true love for another man, Walter Hartright.

The details of the plot, however, tend to become the primary focus of Diana's attention, the themes both illuminating and being supported by the particularities of the text. As this excerpt indicates, Diana is actually engaged in dramatically retelling events, thus creating a narrative of her own that is analogous to *The*



*Woman in White*. She does this effectively and with insight. Although the sentence structures she uses are simple, they indicate a not unsophisticated, even if largely intuitive, appreciation of the women characters' situation and of the melodrama in *The Woman in White*. Laura's only possession, for example, is seen to consist ironically in nonpossession: 'she has no legal power.' This statement is followed by a further irony: the only action open to Laura represents the absence of spontaneous or willed action, and thus scarcely qualifies as action – 'she must submit'; 'she must dismiss'. This theatrical dramatization of powerlessness is intensified by the contrast between the grammatical agent, Laura, and the real agent, the man whose authority in forcing her to submission and obedience is reinforced by the law. By this point, however, story has ousted plot.

Such writing represents an empathic response of a kind that is acceptable at A-level, but in this instance it received only a low mark. By replacing Diana's 'themes' with 'issues' in his marginal comments, the tutor indicated that he wanted a discussion that would perceive ambiguity of a different kind from that which was central to Jo's and Sam's A-level essays. In this case, the ambiguity to be identified is not confined to characters or feelings within the text, but extends to the relation between author and text. In other words, an essay question once again looks to critical theories other than those that typify A-level writing about literature.

### Helping Diana move on

As in the case of Jack's and Jessica's essays, aspects of Diana's could lead her to perceive the theoretical issues at stake. While her essay imposes a particular, school-learned coherence on *The Woman in White* – the coherence of theme with illustrations – there are ruptures and ambiguities in her text through which tutor intervention might enable Diana to gain access to Heller's text, understand the theory on which it is based, and so, perhaps, critique it. These places are marked by a change of modality – i.e. by a movement from an assertion of what is the case to the suggestion of what might be the case. For example, 'Collins does show through Anne the social invisibility of women and their rights' contrasts with the sentence that immediately follows it: 'Marian Halcombe's outburst after her sister's marriage may embody Collins' beliefs upon the subject of female inequality within his society.' Behind both sentences lies a concern

with evidence. The first sentence implies that there is reliable evidence in the text that Anna is an effective means of developing one of the novel's central themes: the social invisibility of women. At this point, 'Collins' is primarily an authorial function, an intention that the text realizes. The second sentence, on the other hand, presents Collins as a person inhabiting the world beyond the text. The tentativeness of 'may' is echoed by Collins' beliefs. This tentativeness can be read in several ways. First, it can imply that the novel cannot be read as evidence of its author's views. The change of modality may thus denote the hold on Diana's thinking of an A-level focus on texts, a focus in which 'close analysis of form and meaning' means treating the text as a decontextualized linguistic object. Since, however, in this particular instance the sentence concerns Marian Halcombe, whom Heller presents as the embodiment of the female subversiveness that Collins finally seeks to contain, 'may' and 'beliefs' could mean that Diana is suggesting an ambivalence on Collins' part toward the qualities and attitudes that Marian represents.

There is a third possible reading, too. As in other parts in the essay where Diana refers to what Heller 'believes', the tentativeness here suggests a resistance to the authority of Heller's argument and the feminist ideology it reflects. In other words, tutor intervention at this point could help Diana both understand Heller and separate from her. This separation should enable her to arrive at a clearer understanding of her own theory and its sources. It should also help her to appreciate that literary criticism is characterized by different approaches and that essay questions rest on trends in literary criticism.

I conclude this discussion of the three undergraduate essays with a brief summary of the differences that have emerged concerning writing at A-level and writing in the university. At A-level, 'argument' (like its synonymous partner in practice, 'personal response') derives its meaning largely from the critical approach associated with I.A. Richards's practical criticism (1929) and F.R. Leavis's (1975) emphasis on literature as a repository of humane values. From this perspective, the details of a literary text are to be subsumed by themes that illuminate the particularities of the text. The novice undergraduate is indeed required to 'argue' (and to give a 'personal response'). But the meaning of the term has now changed. In fact, a number of meanings now cluster around the practice of argument, depending on the theory or theories an essay question encodes. Looking back at the essay questions the three undergraduates had to

address, I note how each points to a different theoretical issue. The question on the accumulation of evidence in an example of crime fiction draws attention to the subordination of narrative detail to philosophical concerns, centering on the relation between fictional events and reality. The question on postcolonialism as a concept is based on different theoretical issues. It raises questions about the relation between a text, an author, and the sociopolitical context, and problematizes the effect of dominant ideologies of empire on the reading of literary texts. The question on the social meaning of an early crime fiction text also raises issues concerning powerful ideologies in historical contexts. In this instance, in view of Diana's particular choice of literary text, the theory and practice of feminist criticism are relevant.

I do not intend to suggest that a program of lectures on literary theory would student essay writers' problems in the transition from school to university. Such lectures could tempt students to assume that a theory is a template into which numerous texts can be forcibly slotted in spite of the texts' differences. This would be taking exemplification to a point where theory was considered more important than the literary text. Furthermore, while I would not suggest that students should never be 'told' anything, the Vygotskian focus on pedagogy that I outlined earlier leads me to avoid simple transmission models of teaching and learning as far as possible. In the next and final part of this chapter, I pull together what I have learned from my reading of the students' essays. Those lessons include a strong conviction that I and in fact all university teachers need to look beyond our role as assessors of students' writing to give more attention to how we can best help students develop as writers on the particular programs of study we teach. I am also convinced that the 'motivated sign' and 'interest', as Kress uses the terms (1995, 1996), are concepts of central relevance to our attempts to ease student writers' transitions from school to university. But, and most important, these concepts apply not only to students' essays but also to tutors' readings of those essays.

### **5.10 Self-reflexivity for students and teacher**

It could be argued at this point that my attention to individual essays evades the realities of the current situation in higher education in the United Kingdom where there is little time in many undergraduate courses for one-to-one tutorials.

My counter•argument would take the following form: time is not in itself the major issue. More important is our disposition as tutors toward teaching and learning. Thus, though I personally regard the individual tutorial as indispensable, I recognize that there are, fortunately, other ways in which the lot of the novice undergraduate writer could be improved. I would give priority to a change in our self-perceptions as tutors – a change in which we all came to regard ourselves as playing a role in the teaching, rather than just in the assessment, of essay writing. This role would involve us in thinking beyond the current research into argument. That is, it would take us along an intellectual route that would lead us to consider as motivated signs (i.e. signs with a history both personal and social) the essay questions we set, the critical works we recommend, the discourses we use in feedback and assessment, and so on.

This route would also lead to the rethinking of the curriculum of English studies in higher education, resulting in more examination and discussion of writing about literature–published writing and student writing – and the theories on which it rests. I am suggesting that we avoid neat answers, and make efforts instead to see student essays not as things to be pigeonholed and graded, but as spurs to self-reflexivity for students and teachers. A student essay could then open up cracks in the apparent seamlessness of the taken-for-granted for students and tutors – a process that could take both forward into their own ZPDs.

Self-reflexivity is thus the theme I take up in these concluding paragraphs. Returning to Jessica’s and Diana’s essays, I now note an irony at the center of my discussion so far. I have pointed out that Jessica considers only texts from the periphery, and I have noted how Diana’s essay fails to use Heller’s text in the way it was expected. What I have ignored is the fact that my focus has resulted in my offering readings that do not do justice to my stated intention to bring the student into the picture – something I accused Mitchell (1997) of not doing in her work on argument. I implicitly treat Jessica and Diana, and also Jack, as the representatives of a particular view of how to write about a literary text, and I measure their essays against what I (in an attempt to identify with their examiners) think they should have written. That focus on what they ‘should have written’ then helps me see how they might be helped to make progress as essay writers. This perception now leads me to look critically at my failure to

note the fact that Jessica is a black woman from the Caribbean and Diana a woman writing about a novel that deals with social injustice to women.

Returning first to Jessica's essay, I now note the possible significance of the following sentences that I omitted in my earlier discussion of her text:

It is important to critically address the stereotyped view of black people in the past because it is part of our history and if we ignore the stereotypes of the past colonial era ... we will be accepting the colonisers' propaganda as true.

I had assumed initially that 'we' and 'our' were generic. Now I see another possibility: Jessica's 'we' may mean 'we black people'. The following statements from her essay now take on special significance. They suggest that it is not only Lamming who has drawn on autobiography and family history. A large number of individuals internationally have had their lives damaged by colonization. Colonization not only affected their ancestors but also affects their descendants.

Bringing Diana's gender into the picture changes my perception of her way of writing. The 'theatrical dramatization' of character and event, which I commented on earlier, now becomes a reminder that modes of criticism have themselves been seen as involving gender issues, a focus at the core of Heller's reading of *The Woman in White*. Furthermore, the interpretative, empathic approach that Jessica demonstrates, and that Mitchell (1994, 1997) would exclude from argument, is one of the forms of writing (autobiography is another) that women academics such as Miller and Ivanic would introduce into the university.

The politics of a student's positioning herself as a member of a particular social group in her writing about literature is clearly an important issue, especially in the United Kingdom, where an increasing number of women, 'nontraditional' students, and those with non-UK backgrounds are enrolling in undergraduate courses. There is a danger, though, that in attempting to be sympathetic to student backgrounds we teachers may fall into the trap of stereotyping students in ways that we, but not the students, see as positive. I can, for example, recall a student who was annoyed at being encouraged to write about the literature of her country of origin. While the teacher thought he was being hospitable to the student's culture, the student felt that she had been slotted into an outdated national identity. This was understandable since she had been living in the United Kingdom for sixteen years. International students have

identified another example of stereotyping, pointing out that teachers can be unaware of the complexities of students' relation to the dominant cultural and political ethos of the countries from which they come. Women students have also felt stereotyped on being asked to write in a personal style and to include autobiographical details. They have argued that they are happier with the conventional way of writing and do not feel that it excludes their voices as women.

These student comments have alerted me to another possible significance in Jessica's use of the pronoun 'we'. It may contain within it an ambivalence, a tension between 'we British' and 'we who are black'. This reminder of the complexities of students' individual histories, and of their positionings in relation to the texts they read, takes me back to 'interest', the concept I have borrowed from Kress (1996). Its significance is now amplified. Accommodating the many factors coming together to make a text as it is and not otherwise, the term interest warns me that I should not see my responses to student essays as the only possible, or necessarily the best, readings.

Interest is also relevant to this chapter's concern with the shifting meanings of argument and the terms that cluster synonymously around it. In commenting on individual essays, I have traced how argument needs to become chameleon-like in the university, taking on different hues to match the differing conceptions of literature and literary criticism encoded in the essay questions assigned. Looking back to the theoretical framework I outlined earlier, I now see that what has finally emerged is a much more complex view of argument: argument as inseparable from interest. That is, argument is the student's remaking of the essay question as she brings together whatever resources of knowledge, feeling, and expression she regards both consciously and intuitively as relevant. The message I derive from this is that I need to help novice undergraduates to hear the voices of past experience so that the new voices of the university can become audible by recognizable echo or by contrast. This means, however, that I need to try to hear my own voices and to be aware of the ambiguities that may lie within them and within argument as interest.

Replacing the meanings encoded in argument at A-level with an appreciation of different critical approaches may initially seem confusing to new students. But as Graves (1986) put it succinctly in his poem 'In Broken Images', a trust in 'clear images' (which derive their clarity from an unquestioning reliance on the

received) must yield to a confidence in ‘broken images’ as the beginning of a ‘new understanding of my confusion.’

### **5.11 Back to the Future**

In the opening paragraphs of this chapter, I stated that I would finally enlarge the real-world frame that I had chosen for this discussion of student writing by returning to the topic of government goals and initiatives. Now, however, my perspective is different. While the introduction to this chapter emphasized my rejection of ‘elite instincts’ and focused, like the chapter as a whole, on the importance of helping all students move on, I now aim to highlight both the problematic and the promising aspects of the recent initiatives of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA).

The QAA’s role is the enhancement of the quality of teaching and learning in the universities. Echoing the government’s emphasis on the need for an employable pool of graduates, the QAA has stated that all undergraduate curricula should develop students’ key skills, which, of course, include writing. The downside to this requirement is the increase in courses in writing that focus, as in the United States, on general academic writing skills. On the other hand, however, QAA initiatives are beginning to integrate writing more consciously into departmental curricula and teaching what in the United States called writing across the curriculum.

This will, I hope, result in more collaboration between writing teachers and teachers of the disciplines. This collaboration can lead to new approaches to writing that go beyond general writing skills and the assumption that academic writing has to be either taught or caught (as the study skills and acculturation orientations have it). Paradoxically, then, it might come about in the United Kingdom that the move toward greater regulation of the university curriculum will have positive consequences.

My concluding paragraph brings me back to the individuals who attend UK universities. It is not only students from underrepresented groups who are now encouraged to enrol in UK universities; there are also an increasing number of international students. In other words, the student population of UK universities is increasingly diverse in terms of the participants’ linguistic, educational, and sociocultural backgrounds. It is a diversity that reminds me how important it is to increase my understanding of other countries’ educational systems and

dilemmas. This has given me insights and possibilities that I aim to use to my students' benefit.



## CHAPTER 6

# Creativity, conformity, and complexity in academic writing: Tensions at the interface

### 6.1 Introduction

The perspective developed in this paper lies at the interface between applied linguistic research on academic writing and the various theoretical discourses that feed into academic literacy or academic literacies. We look at excerpts from student texts and how they enact heteroglossia, by, among other things, negotiating contemporary disciplinary discourses which the students are working on, inter-relating academic conventions such as citation with previous educational values, and developing an argument. These texts throw up questions around academic conventions, and hence academic writing pedagogy. On the one hand, they cannot be ignored, but on the other hand, the aim should be to provide understandings not rules.

### 6.2 Academic literacy and its discourses

The field of academic literacy or academic literacies has received a considerable amount of attention from educators, applied linguists, and others of late, and hence the field has been revitalised. Background approaches feeding into the area include social practice perspectives on academic writing (e.g. Ivanic, 1998; Lea & Street, 1998, 1999; Jones, Turner & Street, 1999; Lillis, 2001; Lillis & Turner, 2001); the implications for academic writing of the social construction of knowledge (e.g. Bazermann, 1988; Myers, 1990; Geisler, 1994; Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995; Hyland, 2000); pedagogical approaches to academic writing (e.g. Belcher & Braine, 1995; Johns, 1997; Zamel & Spack, 1998; Lea & Stierer, 2000). Such multiplicity of input into a field, however, adds to its complexity. Different perspectives are foregrounded in one context, excluded in another, while at the same time, multiple overlappings occur.

One influential perspective comes from an enhanced understanding of ‘Discourse’ (to borrow Gee’s [1990] convention of referencing Foucault’s approach) which sees language use as enacting, and hence perpetuating, pre-existing cultural models. Such models are often those dominant in a culture or society and their dominance exerts the kind of hegemonic power which excludes other cultural models. Much of the work done in ‘new literacy studies’ (e.g. Gee, 1990; Street, 1995) is concerned with opening up spaces of resistance to such dominance. Issues of power and perpetuation on the one hand therefore, and how far, and in what contexts resistance is possible, on the other are major concerns of literacy in education and other social contexts. In the academic context, for example, one debate has waged around whether the precepts of EAP teaching are overly ‘accommodationist’ (e.g. Benesch, 1993, 2001) to normative institutional requirements, or an example of ‘vulgar pragmatism’ (Pennycook, 1997), or not (Allison, 1996).

At the level of working with the individual student, then, there is often a tension between helping them to be successful in their academic endeavours, which usually means accommodating to institutional norms for academic literacy, whilst at the same time, fostering critical language awareness (cf. Fairclough, 1992) as well as helping them to project their own voice in their writing, whilst positioning themselves within their disciplinary discourses. This complexity is often undermined in institutional discourse around language however, where academic literacy is simply ‘common sense’ (cf. Lillis, 1999). At the level of institutional discourse, expectations of academic literacy tend to be normative, embodying ‘the modern consciousness’ whose values the Scollons (1981) associated with what they called ‘essay-text literacy’. This literacy practice is associated with a distant, disembodied voice, projected by a prototypical European Enlightenment scientist ‘discovering’ knowledge and making it visible (cf. Turner, in press). This objectivist relationship to knowledge has of course been challenged in many areas of the social sciences and humanities, but its rhetorical effects continue to hold sway in the conventions of academic writing. This makes for an unstable arena of competing assumptions and expectations, where there is some room for rhetorical innovation but also deeply entrenched norms around institutional practices of assessment and evaluation. These norms in English demand textual cohesion, which includes making logical relationships explicit as well as grammatical accuracy and nuance in lexical choice.

### 6.3 Mediating academic literacy

In this section, we are looking at examples of work from L2 students and the issues of mediation that arise. The function of mediating academic literacy is often called ‘language support’ but drawing on Baynham’s (1995) use of ‘literacy mediators’, we prefer to talk of mediating academic literacy. This does not mean that we write for the student, but attempt to mediate between the background assumptions the student is working with and the dominant institutional assumptions that will make the work acceptable, as well as help the student mediate between the disciplinary discourses s/he is working with and positioning her/himself within them.

The following student is working in the area of visual culture, and drawing on the theoretical discourses of postcolonialism and psychoanalysis. She is extremely competent and well versed in those discourses, able to explain or expound at length, orally, on any question asked. However, as the following extract illustrates, the issue of grammatical and lexical accuracy in English, as well as deictic coherence throughout the excerpt get in the way of reader accessibility.

In other words, I discuss the ‘voice-symptomatic’ (un)consciousness with which the sexual slave women spoke in South Korea during the 1990s which appears in the site of contestation within/beyond the ‘ideological’ consciousness and the state of knowledge determined by the ideologically organized normative discursive performative relations between Japan and Korea and its postwar political and economical relations.

### 6.4 Reading heteroglossia

Recognizing that all texts are the products of heteroglossia (Bakhtin, 1981); i.e. of competing voices, the question we would ask of the paragraph above is: What is the nature of this text’s heteroglossia? This is a question that can reconfigure the student’s ‘problem with English’ especially if it is linked to a view of academic writing as a creative act in which the student writer consciously or intuitively seeks to reconcile the competing voices that beset her. These voices may be numerous; for example, the voices of past instruction; the voices of current tutors; the loud or faint voices of the student’s assumptions and expectations regarding writing in English or the demands of a particular course (Scott, 2001, 2002). However, in this paper we focus on the echoes of the

student's reading in her text, paying particular attention to the heteroglossic tensions that shape it.

The student is researching repressed voices in Korea that are struggling to be heard, i.e. the voices of the Other. Her research involves her in reading texts about otherness by authors who create a 'style' or 'voice' that seeks to capture 'otherness'. These writers may demonstrate the conventional features of academic writing (e.g. nominalisation or the passive voice) but they use the features in a particular way. The following example is from De Certeau's (1986, p. 3-4) history of psychoanalysis, an essay that the student had consulted:

History is 'cannibalistic', and memory becomes the closed arena of conflict between two contradictory operations: forgetting, which is not something passive, a loss, but an action directed against the past; and the mnemonic trace, the return of what was forgotten, in other words, an action by a past that is now forced to disguise itself. More generally speaking, any autonomous order is founded upon what it eliminates; it produces a 'residue' condemned to be forgotten. But what was excluded infiltrates the place of its origin – now the present's 'clean' [*propre*] place. It resurfaces, it troubles, it turns the present's feeling of being 'at home' into an illusion, it lurks – this 'wild', this 'ob-scene', this 'filth', this 'resistance' of 'superstition' – within the walls of the residence, and, behind the back of the other (the *ego*), or over its objections, it inscribes there the law of the other.

As is typical of this kind of writing, De Certeau packs the abstractions with ambiguities and paradoxes [*an order founded on what it eliminates*]; he crosses boundaries or creates in-between spaces in metaphors that juxtapose abstraction and the concrete; (*closed arena of conflict; action [...] disguise; behind the back of the other*); he invents terms ('cannibalistic'); uses punctuation in unconventional ways (a comma before *in other words*; a hyphen in *ob-scene*), and he favours the series as a syntactical means of intensifying meaning (e.g. a series of verbs or adjectives or nouns or elaborative and appositional clauses as in *it surfaces resurfaces, it troubles, it turns; this 'wild', this 'ob-scene', this 'filth', this 'resistance' of 'superstition'*). Generally speaking, this way of writing – this style – enacts 'otherness'.

A number of the syntactical features are those associated with spoken English (e.g. the co-ordinating conjunctions, *and, but*; the placing of pauses, e.g. before *But*; the parentheses, the juxtaposition of phrases; the use of punctuation to direct the reading). This close-to-speech style conforms to psycho-analysis, the talking cure, in its attempt to capture resonances that evade the rationality of

conventional academic argument. It is to this voice, which challenges the conventions of scientific writing, that the text largely owes its readability.

Turning again to the student's text we note that there are echoes of the voices of the authors she is reading. This might be said to be appropriate in view of the fact that her subject is otherness; the return of the repressed. But the student's text represents a problematic hybrid. She is caught between the voice that is required in Ph.D. writing and the voices she encounters in her reading. Her opening sentence (*In other words I discuss*) represents a conformity to the Ph.D. requirement that the writer's purposes be made explicit. The student has also sought explicitness in her syntactically problematic attempt to weld together the different content components of what she wants to say (*with which...; which...*). On the other hand, the voices of her reading are clearly discernible in *voice symptomatic*; in the list of pre-head noun qualifiers – *organized normative discursive performative relations*; and in the slash to suggest ambiguity: *within/beyond*.

We would suggest that the student's perceived problem with language as illustrated in this passage, is rooted in her twofold 'otherness', i.e. in the space she occupies in between the expectation that she write for an 'intelligent outsider' – to quote advice frequently given to doctoral students – and make her purposes clear, and the style of the texts she is reading, which, for all their complexity of content are readable. The student's text is not; she has created a mosaic – a visual construct in which there is little sense of a writer's voice. To express the problem another way by borrowing Bakhtin's (1981) terms, the centripetal voice of the Ph.D. clashes with centrifugal echoes of the texts she has read.

Doctoral students who are doing research that requires a substantial amount of reading inevitably 'pick up' features of the texts they read. We would now argue strongly that academic literacy tutors and subject tutors need to give attention to helping students to understand the larger issues relating to knowledge-making that are reflected in the style of texts from their field of study. The aim should be to provide students with understandings not rules – understandings of how and why the texts they read and the texts they are expected to produce are as they are. Students should then be in a position to exploit the creative potential of heteroglossic tensions such as those we have illustrated above.

What we are suggesting gives ‘language’ a context that is very different from the institutional discourses referred to earlier. However, while the student’s text is undoubtedly problematic as we have indicated, a question remains. How should students write about topics in fields of knowledge that challenge the view of rationality on which the Ph.D. is largely based? How postmodern might a Ph.D. thesis be? The conventions of academic writing have, of course, been challenged, especially by Feminist researchers but the focus has tended to be on the explicit inclusion of personal experience and feelings as in the example below which comes from a Ph.D. thesis:

Teachers setting homework would request us to ‘look this up in the encyclopaedia when you get home.’ Not only did this mean I was unable to do the homework, I was constantly constructed as ‘other’ and inferior, for coming from a home where theses and other resources were not readily available. Casual mentions of ski-ing holidays in Switzerland and days out to places of interest in London and elsewhere re-inscribed this sense of outsidership, and made me long for (and know that I could not have) what looked like a life of excitement beside which mine seemed increasingly tedious and dull.

This view of the importance of the personal in knowledge-making certainly represents a challenge to a view of rationality that is held to express itself in impersonal sentence constructions but it is a long way from postmodern ways of writing which seek to capture resonances in a style that is more usually associated with the poetic or with Deleuze & Guattari’s (1994) view of literary style as affect divorced from propositional meaning. In this paper we can only use our example to suggest that there are more questions to be asked about writing and knowledge-making in different fields of study than have yet been addressed.

## 6.5 Widening the focus

The tensions around language in academic writing do not occur only at the doctoral level, however. The question we have asked – What is the nature of this text’s heteroglossia? – is relevant at all levels of higher education. The examples that we have selected to make this point are from an assignment by a student on an in-service degree course in Education. The student trained as a teacher in a country where, for economic reasons, training colleges did not have well-stocked libraries. This influenced the modes of teaching and learning and made it

impossible for lecturers to set assignments that would require the critical reading of a number of texts.

The student's draft of her first written assignment was seen as demonstrating a 'problem with writing in English.' In her written feedback to the student the tutor made the following numbered comments:

1. You need to write in full sentences.
2. Referencing needs care. Consult the course handbook for examples of how to set out references in the body of a text.

Each instance of these problems was underlined and the appropriate number – 1 or 2 – was written in the margin of the student's assignment.

The following are three examples of the kinds of sentence that were rightly identified as problematic. Each represents a recurring problem in the student's text.

(Dave, 1975) Explain that lifelong education represents the inner necessity of men to continually exceed themselves.

Preparation for life in tomorrow's world cannot be satisfied by a once and for all acquisition of knowledge and know-how. By John Field (2001)

According to the Secretary of State for Education and Employment he wrote that 'To cope with the rapid change and the challenge of the information and communication age, we must ensure that people can return to learning throughout their lives.'

We acknowledge the need for the student to become familiar with ways of integrating citation into text, and of referencing sources but we would argue that the examples above have a larger significance. As in the case of the Ph.D. student, we read the student's writing as evidence of the student's struggle to reconcile competing voices. The discourses about academic writing that the student has been offered on her course are relevant to our interpretations. The student has been told in seminars that an essential feature of academic writing is an 'argument' in which the writer develops her own position – her own voice – in relation to the relevant literature of the field. She has also been advised to acknowledge her sources.

The examples quoted above demonstrate the student's attempt to meet these requirements. However, the student's style of referencing can also be read as articulating her uneasiness regarding the requirement that she position herself in relation to the voices of the 'others' that she has encountered in her reading. As

we indicate below, a closer look at the examples reveals an interesting pattern. In each case the student has constructed a hierarchy by visually and syntactically marking out a space in which her voice and that of the other to whom she refers are both joined and disjoined.

In the first example the student places the subject of the sentence, Dave, in brackets. She then inserts a phrase of her own: *Explain that*. The use of the capital ‘E’ and of the plural form in *Explain* can be read as mere technical errors. However, we would suggest that they should rather be viewed as the student’s intuitive attempt to indicate that the direct quotation of Dave’s words which follows – *lifelong education represents the inner necessity ...* – do in fact signify a position that is shared by her and Dave. The absence of quotation marks is in keeping with this interpretation. It is not an equal sharing, though. The student’s placing of Dave, with date, in brackets at the beginning of the sentence gives his name greater prominence than the conventions of integral referencing would allow. In visually setting Dave apart from herself the student endows Dave, the other, with superior status in the particular field of knowledge-making.

In the second example the student attributes the status of an authority to the cited author by giving him a space of his own that is pegged out by an emphatic, initial *By* and the use of both his first and family names: *John Field*. Interestingly there are no examples of conventional non-integral referencing in the student’s assignment. In each case where that would be appropriate she uses the ‘By’ construction. It is as if she needs to emphasise that the quotation she has just used to build her argument comes from someone whose authority transcends hers.

The third example demonstrates a pattern that is frequently encountered in L2 students’ academic writing, viz., the anaphoric use of a subject pronoun with verb after ‘according to...’ (*According to..., he wrote...*). However, this instance suggests that it may be relevant to consider who is being quoted. Here the student’s syntactically unacceptable use of *he* gives emphasis to the authority of the Secretary of State – the kind of authority which the student said was very highly respected in her country of origin. The Secretary of State’s voice of authority is further accentuated by the student’s enclosure of his words in quotation marks, a device she did not use in the first two examples above. In thus creating a space between her voice as referee and the voice of the State’s



representative the student signals the power of the State. It clearly has a voice that needs to be heeded

Like the Ph.D. student whose writing was discussed earlier, this student occupies an in-between space. In her case it is a space between an institutional past and an institutional present with their different requirements. However, what the examples from this student's writing also indicate is the operation of desire at the centre of student writing. This is almost certainly the case with all writing but it may be especially so when the student is an L2 writer from an educational context with different expectations of student writers from those that characterise higher education in the UK. The student is anxious to meet the referencing requirements but for her this is not merely a technical issue. Desire conflicts with attitudes and feelings towards the Other in the form of the voices in the books she reads – voices that she endows with authority. In fact it might be said that the processes that postmodern writers like De Certeau knowingly try to capture in their writing are being unwittingly demonstrated by student writers like the two whose writing we have considered in this paper.

We acknowledge that our readings of the student's texts are open to question as is always the case with interpretations. We hope, however, that we have stimulated reflection and debate. The writer in the text is currently the focus of a substantial amount of research that looks at 'evaluation' or 'stance' (for example, Hunston & Thompson, 2000; Hyland, 2000; Charles, 2003). This research is based on the analysis of large corpora which are compiled almost exclusively from the publications of professional academic writers. Illuminating though such studies are, they tend to suggest a transmission mode of pedagogy with students being taught linguistic patterns that characterise social interactions in the knowledge-making of different disciplines. Such a pedagogy cannot accommodate the complexities of individual histories and socially shaped 'structures of feeling' (Williams, 1977) in student encounters with new educational contexts. On the basis of the discussion above we would argue that it is here that pedagogy needs to begin.

## CHAPTER 7

# Writing in postgraduate teacher training: A question of identity

### 7.1 Introduction

There are a number of professions in which entitlement to practise may depend on the acquisition of a vocationally oriented postgraduate qualification. School teaching provides an obvious example, and initial teacher training at the postgraduate level is the immediate context within which student writing is considered in this chapter. To be more specific, the writing to which I shall be referring was produced by students on the one-year Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) course. As the word ‘post-graduate’ indicates, the students already held degrees of relevance to the subjects they wished to teach in the secondary school.

However, while the particularities of postgraduate teacher training are my primary focus, I would hope that they do not represent the limits of this chapter’s relevance. In fact, I would suggest that teacher training can provide illustrations of wider issues and controversies which are likely to be pertinent in one form or another to any postgraduate course which includes time spent both in the university and in the ‘real’ world of a profession – a pertinence which may also encompass, to some extent, those undergraduate courses which are sited both in and outside institutions of higher education.

The field of education is characterized by a web of dichotomies – dichotomies that apply equally to law, librarianship, nursing and business administration, to give but four examples. The metaphor of a web has a further usefulness, too: it suggests a generative centre. In this chapter that location and function is given to ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ which are viewed as the dichotomy from whose substance other dichotomies are spun.

Popular discourse offers many examples of the antithetical evaluations which theory and practice currently tend to generate – the useless and the useful; the

half-baked and the commonsensical. Practice as learning by doing in the real world is not infrequently associated with high standards, while theory is regarded as remote from the real and thus as failing through irrelevance to prepare learners for their future roles and tasks. In this way the perception of higher education institutions as far removed from the concerns of the real world is reminded in forms which derive at least some of their emotive power from that deep-seated cultural myth of the ivory tower in which reflection is held to be a nebulous and inadequate substitute for the concrete immediacy of action.

Politicians in the UK have criticized educational theory along these lines for some time. As early as 1983, for example, Sir Keith Joseph, Secretary of State for Education, referred to ‘jargon-ridden theorizing’ (Joseph, 1983). Such attacks became more vehement in the early 1990s, culminating in the statutory requirement that schools play a greater role in the training of teachers. Thus it is that schools are now linked to training institutions in formal partnership arrangements whereby student teachers spend two-thirds of their time in the partnership schools. The partnerships vary considerably in their day-to-day detail and especially with regard to the components of the PGCE course to which teachers in schools make their greatest contribution.

However, even within this new context the preferred mode of training continues to be reflection on practice (Wilkin, 1996: 174). Like most teacher trainers, Carson (1995: 151) defends this focus against its critics: ‘Reflective practice does signal an attitude of thoughtfulness that is necessary for teaching in these uncertain and changing times.’ A consequence of this view is that the individual student is encouraged to think of herself as a reflective practitioner. This image, which seems to confer a definite identity, is however, highly problematic. In fact, so overused has it become in teacher education that, as Carson (1995: 151) himself has commented, it tends to be no more than an empty cliché:

The phrase reflective practitioner has been abroad in the land. So much so that student teachers will roll their eyes at the very mention of the ‘R’ word. Surely it is a term that has been over-used in teacher education and students are right to object to its endless and often empty repetition.

This comment matches my own observations as a tutor. Consequently, in this chapter I attempt to put back into reflective practitioner some of the complexity which is too often emptied out – a complexity which carries important

pedagogic implications especially in relation to student writing. To pursue that aim I shift the focus from reflective practitioner to the broader issues which it encapsulates – issues of agency. In other words, I base my change of focus on the fact that the primary purpose of reflection on practice is the promotion of the trainee teacher’s agency. As I shall shortly indicate, this entails questions of identity and subjectivity.

New contexts have, however, led to new conceptions of the kind of agency, and so of agent, which the PGCE course should foster. In order to lend those new conceptions visibility in their relation to PGCE student writing, I next provide a contrasting background in the form of a brief discussion of PGCE student writing in the early 1990s. I base my comments on a study which I carried out in my role as a PGCE tutor on the education component, as it was then called.

## **7.2 A brief retrospect**

Before the introduction of formal partnerships between schools and institutions of higher education, PGCE students were offered few written guidelines concerning the assignments they had to produce for assessment purposes. The main requirement was that they should relate theory to practice in an enquiry. This specification had as its implicit corollary an idealized identity for the teacher trainee. The PGCE student was assumed to be an active and independent learner who would benefit from considerable freedom to pursue her own particular areas of interest – this being regarded as the pathway to the enhancement of her identity as an active, creative and autonomous practitioner, her agency. In other words, the student writer was expected to possess those dispositions which progressive pedagogy advised her to foster in learners in schools. This perception of learners as active and autonomous constructors of knowledge correlated with a view of writing which reaches back to the Romantic period and emphasizes creativity and individual expressiveness in meaning-making.

The final assessment of the students’ assignments was consistent with this emphasis. Though the provision of minimal criteria might seem to allow students a number of possibilities, the assignments which were awarded high grades were usually strongly interpretative in their orientation. To be more specific the students tended to follow the same basic pattern in which the abstractions of theory were teased out of concrete data such as vignettes from

classrooms, or transcripts of recorded talk, or excerpts from policy documents. Consequently, though the assignments were referred to as enquiries, the most successful tended to be more like essays in which the students used theory in order to develop an individually distinctive and personally relevant perspective on some aspect of educational practice. It was, furthermore, a perspective which avoided simplistic conclusions; instead it showed an awareness of complexity and an abstention from easy answers.

The examiners' comments on the highly rated assignments added another dimension to this emphasis on individual and personally relevant meaning-making. The assignments were treated as if they were mirrors of the writer's subjectivity – a subjectivity regarded implicitly, if not explicitly, as constituting the trainee teacher's ideal identity and the source of her agency in the classroom. The examiners referred, for example, to students' maturity of understanding, and to their being sensitive and knowledgeable, imaginative and insightful. There were some references to traditional academic criteria such as 'this is a cogent argument', 'here is evidence of wide reading'. Such criteria were, however, usually shaped into personal qualities – for example:

He demonstrates an ability to synthesize, compare, sustain an argument with evidence of originality.

A particularly graphic illustration of the extent to which an assignment could thus become identified with the individual who wrote it is provided by the following examiner's comment:

This is clearly an enthusiastic and hardworking student with considerable imagination and promise who should do well in her future career.

This tendency to treat the students' texts as indices of their identity is problematic. However, the problem should not be seen as deriving solely from a possible mismatch between the qualities suggested by an individual student's assignment and those the student might be said to demonstrate in the classroom. Such an explanation would not challenge what most needs to be questioned, since it would reinforce certain assumptions concerning the student's subjectivity – assumptions which can be captured by borrowing those aspects of Bernstein's (1996: 56) characterization of 'competence' which identify the latter with an 'in-built creativity, an in-built virtuous self-regulation'.

Competence, as thus described, serves to make visible the alliance that was being forged on the PGCE course between, on the one hand, progressive views of the learner, and, on the other hand, the view of student writing as the expression of inner capacities implicitly regarded as the source of a teacher's agency in the classroom. The visibility of this alliance helps in its turn to bring into sight, and so to open up to discussion, what has been edited out – any suggestion that writing does not come naturally even at the postgraduate level. Once we attempt to address that omission and so begin to focus on student writing as potentially assisted by teaching, we are inevitably confronted with issues relating to language. I do not, however, restrict language in this context to its lexical and grammatical forms. Few of the PGCE students had difficulties of that kind. In fact most of them were fluent and experienced academic writers. My focus is rather on a student assignment as a text being shaped by the writer: in short, as an example of written discourse (Bazerman, 1981). This, I would suggest, is an approach which could address what the students themselves perceived to be their most pressing difficulty. As one of them put it:

The difficulty I had with the assignment was really not knowing ... what reflecting on practice would be like as a piece of writing.

In more recent years, students have been provided with detailed written guidelines intended to help them know 'what it would be like as a piece of writing'. However, as I shall demonstrate below, the new context of teacher education has created its own tensions and problems.

### **7.3 A new context: Teacher training as a partnership**

When the examiners' primary criterion was an interpretative focus in which the writer developed an individual set of meanings, arts graduates, and especially those with degrees in English, tended to obtain higher grades than did science or math graduates. This is not surprising, since the students could transfer to classrooms and schools the kind of close interpretative reading with which they were already familiar.

The recognition of how the written assignment advantaged some students while disadvantaging others was one factor which led to the development of new, more detailed guidelines. However, as I shall indicate below, the introduction of the statutory requirement that trainee teachers spend two-thirds of their time in schools was a more immediately pressing influence: teachers in

schools were to be involved in advising students on their professional studies assignments. Because they did not have a shared understanding of what was expected of students, a more detailed and explicit specification was required. Adopting an even wider perspective, I see a possible link between the more detailed character of the new guidelines and a change in the general perception of learners and learning in higher education. The new guidelines can be said to reflect a growing emphasis in UK universities on the importance of pedagogy – an emphasis which has led to an insistence that assessment criteria be made explicit to students. A selective plundering of Bernstein's (1996) theories once again helps me to crystallize this change of focus: 'performance', a term which subsumes 'specialized outputs' and the 'explicit rules for realising them', has replaced 'competence'. To put it another way, by drawing on the current government-coined language of teacher training, 'competence' has been ousted by 'competencies'.

However, in the institution in which I work the greater involvement of schools in the training of teachers was largely viewed as a welcome opportunity to develop an improved PGCE course in which theory and practice could be more closely integrated. To emphasize the value of the extensive participation of trainees in the life of schools, student teachers were renamed beginning teachers. For similar reasons the education component is now the 'professional studies' programme. This programme is currently based on the recognition that a teacher is engaged in a wide variety of educational aims and objectives beyond those demonstrated within curriculum areas. Lectures and seminars thus cover cross-curricular topics such as the history of the education system, language and learning, pupil learning and differentiation.

In accordance with the aim of partnership between schools and the higher education training institution, beginning teachers are at present required to carry out a school-focused enquiry as well as a research and development project under the tutorship of teachers in their placement schools, these enquiries being partly intended as a contribution to the school on the part of the beginning teacher. The questions or problems to be addressed are decided in discussion with the teachers, but the assessment criteria are provided by the training institution. These criteria are designed to indicate the 'postgraduateness' of postgraduate teacher training, an aim which I shall comment on later. Students have to relate theory to practice, construct an argument, appreciate the usefulness and limitations of their research methods and assess the value of their

research. The two pieces of writing can (and in the case of the research and development project, usually do) become the basis of the professional studies assignment which the beginning teachers submit at the end of their course.

The trainees are now given detailed written guidelines which break down the school-focused enquiry and the research and development project into component parts. The following excerpt from the abstract of one beginning teacher's final assignment illustrates the pattern that frequently results.

The first section deals with the formulation of the investigation. It begins by posing the main question of the study ... and why it is important. ... The second section explains the methods employed to obtain information and examines the findings of the investigation. ... The third section ... seeks to discern ... what ... strategies could be employed to remedy the situation, and the degree of support for them. ... The fourth section includes an appraisal of the limitations of the data ... and the methods used to obtain information.

In short, the guidelines offered to students represent a move towards performance, that is, towards 'specialized outputs' requiring 'specialized skills' and 'explicit rules of realisation' (Bernstein, 1996). In this instance, a successful display of performance requires the student to adopt an empirical-positivist view of research – a view which the training institution identifies with 'postgraduateness'. In practice, this research paradigm can lead to a rather mechanical application of the guidelines, with the beginning teacher offering a few generalizations about the limitations of questionnaires or interviews (generalizations which could be found in any textbook on research methods), and then tagging on brief summaries of vaguely relevant theories. This is hardly a demonstration of 'postgraduateness', if 'postgraduateness' is taken to mean an understanding of research paradigms and the importance of methodological integrity (Brown & Dowling, 1998).

However, most assignments use the guide lines less slavishly and in ways which point to the students' individual interpretations of the relation between theory and practice – interpretations which turn on what the students make of the partnership between training institution and school. In the next part of this chapter I analyse two assignments which I have selected as illustrations of very different approaches and which together show how two beginning teachers position themselves in relation to the competing discourses of competence and performance: that is, in relation to the unarticulated but clearly evident parameters of their conception of their agency in the classroom.



#### 7.4 A framework for analysing students' written texts

I base my analyses on the four interrelated contexts which Bazerman (1981) identified as shaping written academic discourse. Those contexts are: the object under study; the literature of the field; the anticipated audiences; and the writer's own self. Bazerman was analysing papers by well-known academics (J.D. Watson & F.H.C. Crick, Robert K. Merton, and Geoffrey H. Hartman) who were intent on presenting new knowledge, but the difference between professional academic writers and students is actually an advantage in this instance in that it throws into relief the particular contours of the students' situatedness as writers. In other words, as this reference to situatedness indicates, I seek to avoid the Romantic view of the writer which I outlined above and associated with competence. In place of the decontextualized, creative individual whose writing is viewed as the expression of certain personal qualities or dispositions, I propose a text in which the writer is primarily visible in the connections she makes with, and between, the object of study, the literature of the field and the anticipated reader(s).

In Bazerman's paper the four contexts both impose a coherence on the three examples of academic discourse which he discusses, and simultaneously illuminate the differences in the shaping of the three texts. The objects under study – the structure of DNA, the ambivalence of scientists, and Wordsworth's later poetry – are differentiated in terms of their modality: DNA is an object that exists in the world, the ambivalence of scientists is, however, a concept which has to be argued for, and Wordsworth's later poems are the medium of Hartman's 'subjective recreation of the poetic moment'. It is from these differences in the object under study that Bazerman largely derives his account of the differences in the other contexts. The use of the literature of the field and the role of the anticipated audiences (in this case the writers' peers) mainly differ according to what is regarded as accepted knowledge in each case. Thus Crick and Watson do not need to rehearse the literature relating to DNA but only that concerning its structure, while Merton has to show that ambivalence is a significant absence from the literature about scientific behaviour. Hartman, on the other hand, does not need to refer to other critics' readings in order to persuade his peers that his interpretation is both plausible and enriching of their response.

It is not my purpose to evaluate Bazerman's paper in terms of its adequacy as an account of academic discourse or to use it to develop a theory of writing. What Bazerman offers me is a theoretical orientation or convenient comparative

frame within which to discuss student writing. In fact, the value I derive from Bazerman's paper rests finally on the contrast between the smooth coherence which he discerns in the examples of academic discourse he analyses and the tensions in the PGCE students' assignments which are made visible by attention to these four contexts.

As already indicated, those tensions point finally to questions of agency which turn on where the students locate themselves in relation to theory and practice, a positioning which corresponds to where they see themselves in the partnership between the school and the institution of higher education, and how they interpret 'beginning teacher'. Thus the writer's own self, which tends to be a neglected context in Bazerman's paper, becomes the central, albeit largely implicit, context in the beginning teachers' assignments.

The two assignments which I have selected for discussion were each given high grades. They are representative of different approaches, but together they bring into focus what it means to write about education from within the new context of a partnership between school and higher education institution.

## **7.5 Beginning teacher A's assignment**

The object under study seems clear at first glance. The writer tells us in her brief abstract that the assignment 'looks at some of the theories in the areas of language and learning, language acquisition and bilingualism in the mainstream, and their common currency.' However, 'in the mainstream' signals that her primary concern is not with theory as theory, but rather with theory in its capacity to serve practice. Practice comes more sharply into focus in the next sentence of the abstract: beginning teacher A states that she 'also looks at the ways in which the partnership school provides for its bilingual learners' needs, and at the school's policy statement and recommendations for good practice.' The emphasis on practice is intensified when, in the sentence that follows, A tells her readers that she is in search of 'models of good pedagogy', which can inform her future teaching. This hint of autobiography recursively draws theory and practice into an alliance within a subsuming and personally pertinent object of study – the nature and sources of the teacher's agency in the classroom. As will emerge later, agency (and so also identity) here turns on a clash of discourses in which the meanings and values which A finds in her reading compete with those which she encounters in the world of the school.

At this point a return to Bazerman's paper can serve to highlight the problematic and demanding nature of the beginning teacher's task as an assignment writer. Bazerman's academics each dealt with an object of study which they defined in relation to procedures and knowledge in their well-established fields. The beginning teacher, on the other hand, has to create the object of study within the demands and expectations of the higher education institution and the school.

The implications of this dual situatedness are more clearly traceable within A's assignment when her use of the literature of the field is brought into focus. It is there that she finds her theoretical perspective – a perspective which matches Bernstein's description of competence. This is evident in the assignment's full but concise summaries of the emphasis on personal meaning-making which is to be found in, for example, Barnes *et al.* (1990) and Levine (1990) – an emphasis which offers a view of knowledge as constructed by active learners. The assignment outlines in general terms the pedagogic corollary of this view of knowledge and its implications for the teacher's agency in the classroom – teachers can promote learning by valuing the experience which the learners bring to their learning and by helping them to make links between that experience and the new knowledge which the teacher is introducing.

Beginning teacher A invests her sources with considerable authority. This is evident in the reporting verbs which she uses – 'point out', 'show' and 'demonstrate' – and in the use of generalizations that appeal to accepted wisdom. For example:

The importance of providing opportunities for pupils to continue develop literacy skills in their first languages is now well accepted.

Furthermore, the authority she gives to her sources is invariably located in the authors themselves. Thus sentences like the following which begin with a personal subject are the most frequent form of reference: 'John Wright shows'; 'Wright points to ...'; 'Marion Williams and Robert L. Burden ... identify'; 'Torbe explains'. In short, the educationists to whom A refers are treated as mentors offering her insights which she feels she needs to be able to translate directly into practice. Consequently, ideas are not treated as ideas to be set against other ideas in the development of an argument or a personal philosophy of education. She has found a philosophy ready-made in what she has read, and she implicitly ascribes the teacher's agency in the classroom to an ability to

convert that competence-oriented philosophy in to a recipe for practice. However, that practice is located in a school where the national curriculum and national assessment have introduced a different discourse – a performance-oriented discourse. This has implications for A's realization in her text of the other two contexts which Bazerman proposes – the anticipated audience and the writer's own self.

The sense of audience which the assignment suggests is further evidence of the emphasis on personal meaning-making which A saw as defining the teacher as an agent in the classroom. In that she refocuses her own experience in the light of her reading and acknowledges her needs and interests, the assignment takes on some of the qualities of a personal narrative or diary: she writes for herself perhaps more than for others. For example:

I wanted to know more [about language and learning] ... I now realise that my sensitivity to low levels of fluency may have masked my need to understand far more about the ways in which cultural identities are constructed. I remind myself that there are many ways of doing this which do not involve academic text and enquiry.

Beginning teacher A is, of course, also writing for the examiners and the teachers in the partnership school. However, it is clear that she expects a sympathetic audience since she entrusts her readers with the kind of self-reflectiveness illustrated by the comment above.

Bazerman's fourth context, the writer's own self, is woven into A's text in ways that spring directly from her experience in the classroom. The primary identity which is adopted is that of a beginning teacher, and it is an identity which she finds difficult, as she states several times. For example, she writes:

The need to know has to be created cooperatively by teachers and students in ways that are personally meaningful to learners. This reality is a tall order for beginning teachers.

This positioning of herself in relation to experienced teachers is a theme that keeps surfacing. However, what it serves to conceal is the actual nature of A's problem. While increasing experience will no doubt bring greater expertise, I would suggest that her difficulties currently derive from competing identities which turn on a conflict between competence and performance. On the one hand, she endorses competence-oriented discourses which locate agency in an empowering personal meaning-making (in fact, in view of her enthusiasm her

identity might be said to be that of a disciple); on the other hand, she is also a practising teacher encountering performance-oriented concepts such as ‘transferable skills’. However, since she assumes that competence discourses should translate into rules for the realization of specialized outputs, she sees no contradiction between ‘personal meaning-making’ and ‘transferable skills’ or between Levine’s (1990) competence view of communication and the performance strategies of the communicative approach to language teaching to which she refers approvingly in the descriptions of actual lessons which she includes in her assignment. At this point I need to emphasize that I do not see the problems which I have described as originating in the student. Her assignment is thoughtful and perceptive, and the bedrock values which she expresses (for example valuing each student’s language and culture) are ones which all teachers should surely hold. What I am suggesting is that the pressures associated with being a beginning teacher who spends most of her time in school inevitably result in a strongly felt need for answers, and too little time for reading. Thus, whereas in the early 1990s the PGCE students with high grades developed a personal perspective out of theoretically focused analyses of exemplars of practice, the assignments of the high achievers among the beginning teachers now tend to demonstrate an understandable desire to plunder a narrow range of theory in a search for solutions to immediate problems. However, as I shall argue later, there is a way forward which would not imply going back to the past.

## 7.6 Beginning teacher B’s assignment

Beginning teacher B experienced the same dual situatedness as beginning teacher A, but handled it differently in her assignment. Whereas A is primarily concerned with the application of theory, and wants practice to be in line with it, B concentrates on practice. In fact, she implicitly, and almost immediately, presents practice as more real than theory. Thus, although the object under study is initially ‘differentiation targeting different abilities’, the meaning of that concept is dealt with briefly – a definition drawn from Capel *et al.* (1995) soon getting it out of the way:

Differentiation targeting different abilities is about raising the standards of all pupils in a school not just those underachieving. It can be conceived of as within a whole school policy ... [and] is a planned process of intervention in the classroom learning

of the pupil. It takes into account prior learning and the characteristics of the individual. (Capel *et al.*, 1995: 121)

Having thus disposed of problems of definition, B turns to her primary object of study – differentiation, not as a concept but as a practice. Keeping within that focus, B investigates the extent to which differentiation is in place in the school where she is teaching. Having established that it is in fact a school policy which is implemented in most classes, she arrives at her main concern, bad behaviour. Following the pattern of research provided in the assignment guidelines, she then frames a question:

To what extent can differentiation targeting ability and learning styles help to alleviate bad behaviour?

This question suggests that the object under study derives from anxieties relating to her actual experience in the classroom either as an observer or as a teacher.

The emphasis on practice also influences her choice of relevant literature. She chooses texts which she sees as having a direct bearing on her empirical question. Furthermore, she places what she takes from her reading alongside the comments of members of staff whom she interviews, treating the two sets of sources as similar in kind – both are open to question. This is strongly indicated in her choice of reporting verbs coupled with a personal subject: for example, ‘Gardner proposes’; ‘she (a support teacher) believes’; ‘Topping claims’; ‘according to Reid *et al.*’ However, in referring to her own research, she draws on a positivist paradigm, attributing the status of the real and certain to her results and conclusions. She ‘discovers’, she ‘shows’, she ‘produces findings’. She admits to responding to Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences with enthusiasm, and declares that she will not abandon her interest in the theory even though it has been strongly criticized. She is, however, no disciple: she states that she will put Gardner’s theory to the test in the future, using a larger, more carefully selected sample of students. She thus indicates once again that she holds an instrumental view of theory: it should serve practice. However, she assumes that it can only do so if legitimated by the results of research that uses recognized quantitative methods. This assumption can be said to place the teacher’s agency firmly within ‘performance’ as defined by Bernstein (1996): agency now depends on having the specialized research skills which will enable specialized outputs – findings which can be applied in the classroom.

In contrast with A, who writes primarily for herself, B can be seen to regard her main audience as the teachers in the partnership school. She acts as an informant, as is evident in her didactic mode of presentation. For example, she asks questions such as ‘What is mixed ability?’ and ‘What is differentiation?’, and then provides the answers.

As the discussion above has already suggested, the image of the ‘writer’s own self’ which emerges from B’s assignment is primarily that of an apprentice researcher. However, the day-to-day business and concerns of beginning teachers do not allow a place for a training in research or for detailed planning and discussion of a proposed project. Beginning teacher B has thus finally to conclude that her procedures were inadequate and that none of her findings have any significance. Paradoxically it is in her detailed account of the limitations of her investigation that the merits of her assignment lie.

The general significance of the above analyses of the two assignments can be summarized in the following way: each assignment finally points to the tensions and problems associated with the current siting of the PCGE course in both the school and the university. However, whereas beginning teacher A does not perceive the conflict between competence and performance perspectives in the Bernsteinian sense on the teacher’s agency, B identifies agency in the classroom with an exclusive, performance-oriented emphasis on what is testable within a positivist paradigm.

## 7.7 Conclusions

To conclude this chapter, I turn finally to issues of pedagogy which rest on my selective borrowing and recontextualizing of competence and performance. In so far as it is identified with an in-built creativity, competence can imply that writing cannot be taught. Performance, on the other hand, can suggest that all aspects of writing can be acquired as explicit rules of realization or transferable skills. As tutors we need to question the ‘competence’ view of the student writer, while also resisting the extremes of ‘performance’. Steering between that Scylla and Charybdis is no easy task since there are no detailed maps; each of us, like each of our students, has finally to find her own route, but an awareness of the need to find a route can only help, as can discussion with colleagues (in both the school and the university) of possible ways forward.

Such discussion should not, of course, be seen as uniquely appropriate to teacher training. It should have a place, too, in other professions, such as business administration, nursing, law and librarianship, where students also move between the workplace and the university. In fact, I would argue that students could be in a better position to understand and negotiate the tensions deriving from those two contexts if tutors gave writing a more prominent pedagogic role. What I have in mind is a series of seminars in which the numerous issues pertaining to each of Bazerman's four contexts would be addressed in relation to samples of writing which would include published texts from the course reading lists as well as the students' own coursework in draft or final form. As the analyses of the beginning teachers' assignments have indicated, such an approach could accommodate attention to the particularities of linguistic choice within the competing courses of the workplace and the university.

No matter what their precise content, such discourses tend to dichotomize theory and practice. Within the context of seminars such as I am suggesting, however, the notion of the reflective practitioner would fill with newly minted meaning, since its complex relation to individual conceptions of agency would be visible and open to discussion. In other words, students would address and crystallize for themselves those issues of identity and subjectivity which would inevitably shape not only their writing but also their mode of response to the pressures and demands of learning both on and away from the job.



## PART THREE

### Complications

The first chapter of this part, *Rethinking feedback: Asymmetry in disguise*, analyses samples of teacher guidance and feedback, which represent different conceptions of the teacher-student relation. There are also examples of how differently feedback may be read by the student.

The next chapter, *Written English, word-processors, and meaning-making*, deals with the extent to which the print-outs of students' word-processed texts indicate not only an exploitation of the meaning-making resources of written English but also a use of the word-processor's facilities as a semiotic resource. It concludes that no matter how much new technologies change writing there is likely always to be 'textual' norms for in educational contexts.

And the final chapter, *Error or ghost text? Reading, ethnopoetics, and knowledge making* offers a way of reading errors in students written texts that differs from simply correcting the errors according to the usually applied norm. Using as prompts to interpretation errors of style in the texts of three 'international' students I trace three ghost texts which I place in the larger context of national and international histories and relations.

These chapters are based on:

Scott, M. & K. Coate

2003 Rethinking feedback. In L. Bjork, G. Brauer, L. Rienecker & P. Stray Jorgensen (eds.), *Teaching Academic Writing in European Higher Education*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Press, 87-100.

Scott, M.

2001 *Written English, word-processors, and meaning-making*.

PART 3: COMPLICATIONS

Developmental Aspects in Learning to Write. *Studies in Writing*, 8, 163-176.

Scott, M.

forthcoming Error or ghost text? Reading, ethnopoetics and knowledge-making. In L. Thesen & L.Cooper (eds), *Risk, Writing Research and Knowledge-making*. London: Multilingual Matters.

## CHAPTER 8

# Rethinking feedback: Asymmetry in disguise<sup>1</sup>

### 8.1 Introduction

Higher education in the UK has been the site of huge changes in recent years. The changes can be broadly characterized as representing a move away from a highly exclusive system, in which the participation rate of 18-20-year-olds was still only 15 percent in the mid-1980s, to a more open system in which over 30 percent of that age cohort had gained access by the mid-1990s (Scott, 1995). It can thus be said that, broadly speaking, higher education in Britain has undergone a transformation. The process of transformation is not yet complete, however. The current government would have the participation rate of 18-20-year-olds leap to 50 percent in the near future.

The transformation of higher education has not been confined to participation rates at the undergraduate level. The number of postgraduate students is now almost double the number of undergraduates in the 1960s (in 1960 there were 270,000 undergraduate students in the UK, and by 1998 there were 403,000 postgraduates (HESA, 2000)). The postgraduate student population represents diversity of several kinds. Some students are, for example, following courses that are not directly related to their undergraduate fields of study; others are returning to study after a long absence, in which case their academic skills tend to be rusty or outdated.

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<sup>1</sup> Another version of this paper has appeared under the same title as Scott, M. & K. Coate (2003). The 'we' and 'our' in this chapter refer to myself and to Kelly Coate, the original co-researcher and co-author.

A consequence of these changes in the composition of the student population at undergraduate and postgraduate levels is that teachers in higher education can no longer assume that their students will arrive with the kinds of academic ‘know how’ that could be taken for granted in the past. Within this context student writing is receiving particular attention since students’ success or failure on most higher education courses depends to a very large extent on the quality of the students’ written coursework, dissertations or theses. There is thus a growing body of research that seeks to address the need for teachers in higher education to help their students to move on as academic writers. This general concern to help student writers is the context framing the ongoing research project on issues of feedback in the institution where we teach.

## **8.2 Our data**

Although we recognize that feedback on student essays can come in many forms which inter-relate in complex ways (Low, 1996), I have concentrated on written feedback. The reason for our decision to delimit the object of my research in this way is that the students attach primary importance to the written comments they receive from their tutors on individual pieces of work. As an MA student put it: ‘unlike oral feedback, the written has permanence. We can take it away and think about it: we can refer back to it when we have to write the next assignment.’

We initially collected two kinds of data: (i) comments obtained in the initial phase of our ongoing research project when we conducted a preliminary survey by means of a short questionnaire about teachers’ own practice regarding feedback, and (ii) samples of written feedback on drafts of student essays. We are now in the stage of the research in which we are interviewing a sample of teachers and their students. Both are asked, individually, to discuss a particular piece of written work for which the teacher has provided some form of written feedback. Although we have only just begun this stage of the research, we are already seeing signs of gaps in communication between teachers and students that relate to different perceptions of the teacher-student relation as realized in the feedback.

### 8.3 Existing research into feedback in UK universities

Surprisingly, in spite of the increasing concern to help students ‘move on’ as learners, to which we referred above, there is a dearth of research in the UK into written formative feedback on students’ written assignments (Higgins *et al.*, 2002). The primary trend within the existing literature of the field is to emphasize the failure of students to understand teachers’ comments on their written work. This was first pointed out by Hounsell (1987). His large-scale investigation of undergraduate conceptions of the essay provided evidence of a mismatch between student understandings and teacher meanings. Thirteen years later Lea & Street (2000) produced a similar finding. Their research in two UK universities revealed that typical feedback discourse (e.g. references to structure and argument) tended to be ‘rather elusive’ to students.

More recent studies in the UK have also explored problems with feedback (Ivanic, Clark & Rimmershaw, 2000; Higgins *et al.*, 2001; Lillis & Turner, 2001). In these, as in earlier instances, the investigation of feedback practices is largely driven by a concern that students are not receiving the kinds of feedback that will help them improve their writing. Underpinning such criticisms is the unexamined, idealised conception of feedback as a process in which teacher comments should be precisely mirrored in student comprehension and use. In other words, as Higgins *et al.* (2002) point out, there are complexities that are not addressed since important aspects of feedback have been left largely unexplored in the UK. These aspects include the relation realized in the feedback between teacher-writer and student-reader, which must surely play a significant part in the extent to which students are able to put feedback to use.

The existing research referred to above focuses on feedback at the undergraduate level. However, we would argue that studies of feedback at the postgraduate level could make a contribution to teaching and learning at all levels in the university since any complexities in the teacher-student relation in written feedback are likely to be writ large at the postgraduate level. Our ongoing research project thus focuses on written feedback to students following postgraduate and post-experience degree courses in our institution. Since our primary aim is to unveil complexity, the examples we offer below represent a selection of instances that we regard as telling.

## 8.4 Theoretical perspective

We approach feedback as an example of a social practice. From this perspective, samples of written feedback are examples of documents which, to borrow Bazerman's (1981) words, 'serve specific functions within historical and social situations.' We find an amplification of the focus in the concept of 'communities of practice' (Lave & Wenger, 1991). They write: 'Through textual practices writers and readers convey to one another the beliefs and value systems of the disciplinary cultures in which they participate.'

This emphasis on practice as socially and historically situated and as incorporating the values and beliefs of a particular community has led us to treat samples of written formative feedback as shaped to a large extent by the teacher's perception of the social relation between teacher-writer and student-reader, and by the meanings and values (discourses) of the university.

The concept of the 'pedagogic relation' (Bemstein, 1990, 1999), broadly interpreted, gives specificity to this perspective. We use the pedagogic relation as the lens through which to examine the samples of written feedback that we have collected. The pedagogic relation, i.e. the relation between teacher and taught in terms of authority, is a concept that carves out a rather different object of attention from any that we have come across in the growing number of published papers about feedback. It seemed to us to be particularly appropriate to a discussion of feedback given to postgraduate and post-experience students. In such a pedagogic context the boundaries between teacher and taught are not clear-cut and the relation between tutor and student may need to be very carefully negotiated. Although analyses or discussions of feedback at the undergraduate level inevitably touch on the relation between teachers and students (Hounsell, 1987; Ivanic, Clark & Rimmershaw, 2000; Lea & Street, 2000), the problems and complexities surrounding the teacher's role and authority do not fall within the authors' remit.

Bernstein's conception of the pedagogic relation draws attention to such complexities. Bernstein treats the relation between teacher and taught as essentially and intrinsically asymmetrical. Its realisation is, however, often very complex since strategies may be used for disguising, masking, and hiding the asymmetry. One of the most important points about this asymmetry, Bernstein suggests, is that the power and authority of tutors over their students is always

there, even if it is ‘hidden’. The tutor has the power to (in Bernstein’s language) ‘frame’ the pedagogic messages they send to students. Weakly framed messages such as feedback – do not convey a strong, authoritarian, didactic relationship. So, although, on the surface, a more equal relationship may be interpreted, the power of the tutor has been concealed.

In our research project, we have examined the samples of written feedback that we have collected for evidence of ‘disguising, masking, and hiding’. What we have found adds subtleties and ambiguities to the portrayal of the teacher-student relation that emerges from our other data, viz., the comments teachers made in response to our preliminary questions about their practices concerning feedback.

## 8.5 Teachers’ responses to our preliminary questions

In view of our interest in the pedagogic relation, the most significant questions in our survey are those that required respondents to state what they considered the purpose of feedback to be and, in particular, what they regarded as the value students derive from feedback. Responses as to the purpose of feedback can be summarized as generally depicting the teacher as a helpful guide, whose comments would enable the students to improve their essays and to identify with disciplinary cultures – or, as immersion into the academic community of practice. Students were thus primarily portrayed as apprentices with knowledgeable and helpful teachers anxious to share their expertise so that the students might become junior members of the discipline. In the responses to the question about the value that students derive from feedback there is, however, a shift of emphasis with the responses focusing mainly on the students’ psychological needs. Feedback is invested with the power to motivate and encourage.

This emphasis on the importance of the positive in feedback echoes much of the advice given in staff development programmes. Drawing on Open University practice, Baume & Baume (1996: 10) for example, recommend the ‘feedback sandwich’ in their advice to the novice teacher on how to give feedback:

- First the good news;

- Then the bad news (constructively!) and how to overcome it;
- And finally a note of high encouragement.

This sandwich unequivocally ascribes to teachers the knowledge and authority to separate the good from the bad. However, it also echoes the literature about learning that stresses the importance of not discouraging students. Teachers must be ‘kind’, by being ‘constructive’ and by ‘rounding off the feedback with a high note and encouragement’ (Baume & Baume, 1996). The many samples of feedback we have collected often follow this sandwich type of format within a fairly weak framing. However, as we shall finally demonstrate the sandwich can mask considerable complexity.

## 8.6 Samples of feedback

The pedagogic relation that has emerged from our discussion so far represents a marked asymmetry between teacher and taught. It is, however, a benignly intended asymmetry that would avoid discouraging the student. Our examination of samples of written feedback does not destroy this emphasis on encouragement and motivation, but does complicate this apparently clear picture. The feedback samples we analyzed bring to light the ambiguities and dilemmas that tutors negotiate, part consciously and part intuitively no doubt, when writing feedback. This is particularly apparent in samples where the teachers may be attempting to engage in a supportive dialogue with their postgraduate students. We have selected three samples for discussion. Each represents a different way of ‘disguising, masking, hiding’ the pedagogic relation.

### Example 1

This example of feedback was typed on a slip of paper that was stapled to the first page of the essay draft:

You have targeted the question and given a very full and interesting answer. How heavily have you relied on your sources?

The opening sentence offers a positive and emphatic judgment, ‘you have targeted’, ‘you have given’. It begins with a reference to a familial assessment



criterion: students should always address the questions given. The sentence continues in the assessment mode, calling the essay ‘full and interesting’. The asymmetry between teacher and student is obvious. The fact that the feedback is attached to the top of the first page of the essay emphasises the asymmetry. The feedback functions rather like an abstract, summarising what is to come, and by its position on top of the student’s text, visually representing the hierarchical relation between teacher and student. However, a paradox emerges at this point, as the teacher gives no examples from the student’s text to substantiate or illustrate her judgment.

As so often with feedback (see Ivanic, Clark & Rimmershaw, 2000), this lack of specificity implies the existence of a set of norms that transcends the personal and is possessed by both teacher and student. This is perhaps most clearly evident in the teacher’s choice of the epithet ‘interesting’. Although ‘interesting’ suggests ‘interesting to me the teacher’, the epithet here takes on the status of a norm independent of the teacher. Thus it is that the asymmetry between teacher and student is simultaneously both asserted and hedged by being depersonalised. A further assumption follows from this implicit claim that the student also owns such normative metadiscourse. The student is assumed to be able to relate the teacher’s comments to what she has done in her essay, so giving particularity to ‘you have targeted the question’ and ‘a full and interesting answer.’

## Example 2

This example of feedback was provided by e-mail:

Dear A.

You have made a number of very good points in your discussion of the two passages. As you said yourself, what could be improved is the organization of the content rather than the content itself.

Here are some comments that I hope you will find helpful:

1. Your introduction. It is not necessary to define lexical, syntactical and organizational. The meanings are not open to debate in this context. [It is always difficult to know to what extent one can assume that the meaning of a term is so well known generally that there is no need to explain it].

2. It might help you to organize your points if you began with a brief reference to the different conditions under which passages like those given (i.e. informal spoken and formal written language) are produced. You have included a number of points (speech is face-to-face; the speaker is composing at the moment of utterance; writing: audience at a distance, unknown; time to compose and revise). What you have not said is that these differences result in the differences in the characteristics of speech and writing that you refer to in another part of the essay e.g. more informal vocabulary (lexis) in informal speech; fillers – to give the speaker thinking time; pauses – appeals to the listener.

3. The following points refer to statements in your text that I have asterisked.

\* There are no sentences in speech, sentences with capital letters and full stops are features of writing. Speech has units of intonation and pauses. See Kress & Halliday on your reading list.

\*\* In the literature about spoken and written language, speech is described as sequential: co-ordinating conjunctions (and, but) are common. Formal written language is hierarchical-main clauses with subordinate clauses. Look at the organization of the written passage. What is the function of the sentences? Is there a generalization; elaboration; examples, conclusion...?

\*\*\* What do you think the intonation patterns of the spoken excerpt might be?

I will be happy to answer any queries you have about the comments above either at the tutorial or by e-mail in advance of the tutorial.

Best wishes, B.

The asymmetry between teacher and student is again marked but in a different way. The teacher offers detailed comments on the content and organization of the essay draft and obviously has a clear conception of how the essay could be improved. She mostly makes that explicit, pointing to omissions and irrelevancies and giving instructions. For example: ‘What you have not said is that ...’, ‘It is not necessary to define ...’, ‘There is no need to give long general accounts of spoken and written language. Tie the comments ...’. There is, in fact, only one instance of the use of a modal verbal form that overtly reduces the asymmetry between tutor and student, viz. ‘It might help you to organize your points if you ...’.

There are, however, several other ways in which the teacher also seeks to mask the asymmetry between herself and the student. She presents the feedback in the form of a friendly letter that begins with ‘dear’ and concludes with ‘best wishes’. She begins by acknowledging the student’s self assessment of the draft. She implies that she shares a problem with the student: ‘It is always difficult to know to what extent one can assume ...’. She also reduces her own authority in relation to the topic of the student’s essay by appealing to the authority of published authors. In other words, she acts as an intermediary presenting not her own ideas but rather drawing the student’s attention to those of the experts.

It is, however, the teacher who decides which of the experts are relevant. Although she gives credit where she can to the student’s points, and attempts to show, rather than simply state in general terms, how the essay might be improved, she is clearly guided by her conception of the ‘good’ answer on this particular topic. Whereas the teacher who provided the first sample can be said to represent the authority of the academy in general, the teacher in the second sample represents authority in relation to a particular area of knowledge; an authority which rests finally on her knowledge of the literature of the field.

### Example 3

This sample was hand-written:

Dear C.

Thanks so much for sharing your draft with me. We agreed that you shld try to let me have this draft when you did even though it may not be as polished as you wd wish. Please, therefore see my remarks as being offered in a supportive spirit, to help you to take it forward.

May I offer you some general comments on your approach to academic writing? It comes across as a rather disconnected set of generalisations. Try to develop and substantiate your points more, e.g. by referring to the literature more, by offering data or other evidence, and (here) by quoting from the reports in question.

Specific suggestions for developing your argumentation would include

- Avoid single sentence paragraphs; develop each point
- Aim for 2-3 paragraph breaks per page

- Adopt a 12-point typeface and always put your text into a double-line spacing format
- Avoid single paragraph sections-aim for sections, say, of 2-3 pages.

Particular points on this essay

Do you answer the question (e.g. around the respective visions of the 3 reports)?

Do you develop a definite account of the learning society? Are the different interpretations compatible?

Try to ensure your conclusion draws the threads together specifically in relation to the title. Please do not be alarmed by all my comments and please keep going!

D.

This sample brings to mind a comment made by a teacher in our initial survey on feedback: ‘Not enough time for dialogue with them all – often rely on written feedback – a gift – rather than conversation, a loop!’ The perceived benefits of engaging in a dialogue with students were reinforced by Ivanic, Clark & Rimmershaw (2000), who nevertheless found that feedback written as an ongoing dialogue between students and tutors was rare in their sample. E.g. in sample 2, the tutor issued an explicit invitation to dialogue, but a dialogue that would enable the student to have any misunderstandings clarified.

Sample 3 appears at first reading to encourage dialogue on almost equal terms. It clearly sets out to narrow the gap between teacher and student and to engage in a (written) conversation. This is indicated by the informality of contractions such as ‘shld’, ‘wld’, and by the colloquialism of ‘thanks so much’, and by the fact that, as in sample 2, the feedback begins in personal letter mode (‘Dear C.’). The teacher refers to previous communication between himself and the student and his comments are thus obviously intended to be part of an ongoing dialogue with the student. However, if we consider the sample in relation to the description of written feedback as a gift, what we find here is not so much a dialogue as an exchange of gifts. The teacher begins by thanking the student for the gift of their draft: ‘Thanks so much for sharing your draft with me.’ Having thus constructed the essay as a gift given to him, the teacher then offers his comments in exchange, and overtly narrows the gap between himself and the student still further by referring to an agreement reached earlier: ‘We agreed

that you shld try to let me have this draft when you did even though it may not be as polished as you wd wish. Please, therefore see my remarks as being offered in a supportive spirit, to help you to take it forward.’

What is glossed over in these opening sentences is the difference in the kind and value of the gifts to be exchanged. The gift that is being given by the teacher is, in fact, complex. On first reading, the opening comments sound positive and encouraging. However, the feedback does not begin in the style of the typical ‘feedback sandwich’ by pointing out what is good in the essay. Instead, the initial sentences serve as a sugaring of the potentially unpleasant pill that is actually the main gift being offered by the teacher. This impression is strengthened when the teacher asks (rhetorically) for permission to continue (‘May I ...’) as if about to cross into dangerous territory.

The asymmetry of the teacher-student relationship is, however, less masked in the attempt to make explicit the purpose of the feedback (to help the student improve). The comments then become quite specific as the teacher moves into his position of authority in order to show the students how they can improve their work. Although the comments continue with the reference to a gift being given (‘May I offer you ...’), what is then offered indicates that the essay needs much revision and has not yet conformed to the academic conventions required. In fact, the statements ‘May I offer you some general comments on your approach to academic writing? It comes across as a rather disconnected set of generalisations,’ begin to point to serious weaknesses in the student’s work. The most direct and serious criticisms are perhaps the ‘particular points’ which are left to last: ‘Do you answer the question’, ‘Do you develop a definite account of the learning society’ and ‘Try to ensure ...’.

However, these criticisms are framed by attempts to lessen the teacher’s power. In his final comment (‘Please do not be alarmed by my comments and please keep going’) the teacher returns to an encouraging note but it is in a different key from his opening sentences. There he explicitly ceded power to the student before claiming the authority to make specific comments about the student’s work. Here he acknowledges that the gift may have been hard to accept and (successfully) lessens its force.

Our comments on the three samples above are not intended as criticisms of the teachers who wrote the feedback. We cannot tell precisely why the

pedagogic relation is masked in each case or the extent to which the teachers may be shaping their feedback in the light of a personal knowledge of the particular student and her likely response to criticism. Nevertheless, viewing feedback from the perspective of the 'pedagogic relation' has led us to see that the feedback sandwich hides complexity from sight. In fact, if there are serious issues to be raised, as in samples 1 and 3, providing written feedback can be an uncomfortable, even risky task. This is almost certain to be so when the students are like those in our sample: postgraduates with professional experience. Such students are almost our colleagues but not quite.

Taking a wider view we would, however, suggest that an analysis of the pedagogic relation could be valuable at the undergraduate level too. The expansion in undergraduate enrolments includes an increasing number of mature students who question institutional authority patterns (see Lillis, 2001). Are these students contributing to a change in the pedagogic relation at that level, with tutors less likely to adopt an explicit and clear-cut position of authority-with-kindness?

## **8.7 Further complexities: teacher and student meanings**

As stated earlier, we are currently interviewing pairs of individuals, each pair comprising a teacher and a student, about the written feedback the teacher had given the student on a particular assignment. Although this phase of the research is at an early stage, it adds emphasis to the importance of the pedagogic relation as realized in written feedback. In fact, we would now argue that attempts to provide feedback that students can use are likely to fail if attention is given only to trying to make concepts such as argument or structure transparent. In other words, our interview data add further complexity to the sandwich view of feedback and lead us to claim that how students interpret feedback is strongly connected to how they perceive the teacher\*student relation. To give one illustrative example: when interviewed, an MA student stressed the importance of the encouragement she felt her teacher had given her through the written feedback on her essay. She was confident that she had grasped what the teacher's comments meant. That this was not, in fact, the case became very clear

when the student was asked how she felt about the comment that her ‘critical view of the literature’ was adequate. The student replied:

I wasn’t 100% sure that I was critical enough but apparently I was ...

I wasn’t sure if I would be asked to be a bit more critical or not, but apparently it was fine ...

In this response, the student is equating an adequate ‘critical review’ with offering a large enough number of criticisms. However, the teacher, who was also interviewed, meant that the student had shown some insight into the major issues relating to the topic of the essay. We would argue that this mismatch in meaning rests finally on a particular perception of the teacher-student relation. The student’s quantitative notion of criticism assumes that the teacher’s role is that of an assessor awarding points on some kind of right-wrong scale. For the student the asymmetry between teacher and student is thus marked with the student seeing her role as requiring conformity to expectations relating to quantifiable criteria. From this student perspective, the teacher’s role in giving feedback is to ensure that the student has scored enough points on the particular topic. The teacher, however, related being critical to epistemological understandings and intellectual developments within the disciplinary field. She saw herself as a representative of that field of study, and as a guide and mentor rather than an assessor. In brief, she saw feedback as a means of inducting the student into a particular ‘community of practice’ (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

What the feedback did achieve in this instance was a boosting of the student’s confidence – a purpose recommended in descriptions of the feedback sandwich; the student now feels she can write at the appropriate level. The student has, however, been left with misperceptions that are likely to put her at a disadvantage further on in the course.

The example above is typical of a dominant theme that is emerging from our interview data in that it graphically illustrates how perceptions of the function and meaning of feedback are rooted in perceptions of the pedagogic relation. This has important implications for classroom practice especially in view of the internationalisation and massification of universities in the UK and elsewhere.

## 8.8 Implications for the classroom

Our suggestions for classroom practice are based on our conclusion that if students cannot act on the written feedback they have received it may be that they have not appreciated, or are questioning or rejecting, the particular ways in which the asymmetry of the pedagogic relation realized in the feedback. It is thus important that as teachers we consider feedback not simply as an assessment of the student's work but also as one of the primary forms of interaction between our students and us.

It is here that writing teachers could make a significant contribution in collaboration with subject teachers. We would recommend awareness-raising staff development sessions at which subject and writing teachers would discuss the teacher•student relation in samples of feedback, so identifying the complexities and reflecting on their own practices and assumptions as givers of feedback. We have in mind a productive dialogue that would represent a sharing of expertise. Writing teachers would bring their linguistic skills and experience in analysing genres and discourse: subject teachers their discipline-specific aims. Each group would have understandings of students' backgrounds and responses to share.

We would also recommend the discussion of samples of feedback as an extension of a common practice in higher education classrooms in the UK where students are given samples of student essays to comment on and are asked to identify what the teachers saw as positive or negative features. In discussing the kind of relation between the teacher-writer and the student-reader that may be realized in the samples of feedback, students would be able to articulate their own assumptions about what it means to be a student and about how their teachers are trying to communicate with them in their role as teachers. The development of this kind of awareness could be particularly important for the students (and valuably informative for their teachers) in view of the changes in the participation rates in higher education that we referred to earlier. It could foster a continuing conversation between teachers and students in which the essential asymmetry between teacher and taught would, of course, continue to exist but would be a matter for discussion and debate.

Finally, what we have reported is intended to be tentative and to prompt enquiries in others' classrooms. Among the questions, which our survey and the



samples of feedback raise are: at what stage should formative feedback be given to students: i.e. at what point is it most valuable to the students? It would seem that sample 3 was given at an early stage (when the student was reluctant to let the tutor see the essay). Was the student able to use the feedback or did she feel crushed by it – in spite of the tutor’s very good intentions? These are the kinds of essential but under-researched questions that both writing and subject teachers could pursue in relation to their own students.

## **8.9 Conclusion**

hat we have presented in this paper are only snapshots from an ongoing research project. We have concentrated on an unexplored aspect of feedback – the pedagogic relation as realized in written feedback. In so doing we have sought to uncover complexities, which are hidden by advice to teachers such as is contained in the recommendation that their feedback should conform to the feedback sandwich. We have thus aimed not at closure but at stimulating debate and agenda for further reflection and enquiry.

## CHAPTER 9

# Written English, word-processors, and meaning-making

### 9.1 Introduction

This chapter adopts a particular approach to ‘development’ – an approach which is encapsulated in Kress’ (1996) statement that development has an ‘intimate connection with the possibilities of systems of representation such as language, image or gesture’ (1996: 237). When placed within the context of Kress’ overarching argument, this statement can be elaborated in the following way: in a pedagogic environment development is a matter of learning how to exploit systems of representation (of which language is the most obvious example) as resources for making meaning in response to the demands of particular tasks.

This semiotic focus on development does not, however, imply a model of pedagogy in which the teacher simply transmits her knowledge to the student – a model which Kress detects in educational discourse that refers to learners ‘acquiring’ language ready-made. For Kress acquisition edits out the fact that meaning-making is always implicated in individuals ‘social and cultural histories and present positions, ... their affective dispositions, their interests ...’ (1996: 236). From this perspective meaning-making necessarily involves the individual in a making or remaking, to a greater or lesser extent, of systems of representation. As Kress (1996: 236) puts it: ‘Individual users of language – or any other human system of representation – are users and (re)makers of that system of representation.’

Kress’ emphasis on the (re)making of systems of representation has strongly influenced my view of my role as a university teacher who seeks to foster the

development of her postgraduate students' academic writing in English, and is mindful of the fact that many of these students are non-native speakers (NNS) of English. Firstly, following Kress, I place the individual learner and her meanings centre stage. Secondly, I perceive a synonymy between cognition and the individual's (re)making of written English as a system of representation. In Kress' words: 'the individual's semiotic work is cognitive work' (1996: 237).

Building on these two themes from Kress, I arrive at a particular theoretical position regarding the development of NNS students' writing in English within the contexts of postgraduate education – a position which shifts the focus from inner mental processes and measurements of linguistic proficiency to the individual student's perceptions of the possibilities of written English as a semiotic resource. From this perspective, pedagogy ceases to be seen as primarily dependent on general stages of cognitive or linguistic development. The pedagogic emphasis is placed instead on enlarging the individual student's awareness of written English as a resource for making meaning in the student's particular field of study.

In keeping with Kress' emphasis on the user of systems of representation as (re)makers of those systems, I also regard attention to individual students' current perceptions as indispensable if I am to succeed in moving students on in their learning how to mean in the medium of English in their essays and dissertations. In short I would argue that Clay's (1996) observation that children enter the complex activity of writing from many different starting points is as true, if not truer, of the adult learning to be a successful writer at university, since as Clay (1996: 207) puts it: 'Descriptions of average/typical/normal achievement or sequences for learning are always surrounded by error, generate their own exceptions, and do not necessarily constrain what can be true of individuals.'

A corollary of this view of development is that I see myself as an interpreter of students' meanings and of the extent of their awareness of the possibilities of systems of representation, but an interpreter who seeks to be alive to other possible interpretations. To put it another way, I attempt to lend students my consciousness, offering not assertions but hypotheses and alternatives for discussion. This aim finds its theoretical summation in Vygotsky's writings (trans. & ed. Kozulin, 1986). It ties in to the notion of proximal development

(ZPD) or, to borrow Doris Lessing's (1972) metaphor, to find the cracks through which the new may flood.

## 9.2 Written English as a semiotic resource

The focus on pedagogy which I have outlined above provides the studies reported in this chapter with their primary rationale. However, a question that the comments above are likely to provoke is, of course: what are the characteristics of written English when it is used as a resource for meaning-making in academic writing?

In linguistics (see Ventola, 1996), 'lexical density' (Halliday, 1989) tends to be presented as the primary characteristic of academic writing. Lexical density is achieved primarily by nominalization (the objectifying of processes by the replacement of verbs with abstract noun forms). This leads to a compactness and compression of content. As Halliday (1989: 66) observes, lexical density is a matter of how 'closely packed the information is.' Taking the metaphoric implications of 'closely packed' further, I arrive at a view of the text as a container into which a great deal of content has been compressed. Another characteristic which is commonly ascribed to 'good' academic prose and which also implies the metaphor of text-as-container (but in this case a transparent container) is 'clarity' (see Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

'Lexical density' and the metaphors it spawns are, of course, related to a view of academic writing as a form of meaning-making that is primarily concerned with conceptual abstractions. In other words, academic writing is associated with a particular conception of rationality in which language is merely a container of, or conduit for, objective meanings. However, this view of academic writing actually neglects an aspect of written argument which is emphasised in the Social Sciences in UK universities, especially at the postgraduate level, viz. 'argument' as constituted primarily by the adoption of an individually distinctive focus (see Scott, 1999). Such a focus, particularly if nuanced, tends to require the exploitation of the prosodic aspects of written English. A text needs, in short, to give the impression of meanings in the process of being made, debated and engaged, and not simply displayed. It is here that rhythm and the creation of a voice in the text become important. As Kane

(1988: 166) points out, ‘good rhythm’ both reinforces meaning and gives words ‘nuances they might not otherwise have.’ Kane also reminds us that, while there is inevitably a subjective element in rhythm, with even experienced readers differing in what they ‘hear’ as they read silently, rhythm is not simply a matter of individual perception: ‘writers can ... regulate what their readers hear: not completely, but within fairly clear limits’ (1988: 166).

Rhythm as a semiotic resource tends to be neglected, however, in study skills guides aimed at student writers. For example, the introduction, body and conclusion of an essay clearly spatialise the text by analogy with a physical object with visible parts. Even flow is related not to rhythm but to a view of a text as an object or physical structure in which the parts are attached to each other by means of cohesive devices (e.g. Swales & Feak, 1994). The importance of punctuation to rhythm (see Halliday, 1989; Kane, 1988) is also overlooked, its function being seen as only grammatical or logical.

I have concentrated so far on written English as a semiotic resource without taking into account the technical means used to generate written texts. In now seeking to remedy that oversight I am indebted to Kress & Van Leeuwen (1996: 233) who have shown me that ‘technology enters fundamentally into the semiotic process through the kinds of meanings which it facilitates or favours.’ In other words, the tools we use and the surfaces on which we use them, whether pen, ink and paper or word-processor with screen, keys, mouse, and facilities such as a choice of fonts, are not mere tools or surfaces since modes of inscription and surfaces carry meanings. New technologies thus afford new semiotic resources which combine with other systems of representation traditionally associated with semiosis to give meaning its materiality in the form of, for example, a written text, drawing, or sculpture.

In elaborating this perspective, Kress & Van Leeuwen (1996) ask a question of importance to this chapter. Their question is: ‘Is a written text the same object or a different one when written with pen and ink or with a word-processor?’ In introducing their own answers to that question they point out that most linguists would reply: ‘No question. It is the same text.’ To Kress & Van Leeuwen (1996: 231), however, ‘the material expression of a text is always significant’, i.e. it carries meanings. They amplify that statement in the following words:

Texts are material objects which result from a variety of representational practices that make use of a variety of signifying systems each of which contributes to the meaning of the text in its own particular way ... We are interested, therefore in the surfaces on which inscriptions are made (paper, rock, plastic, textile, wood, etc.), in the substances with which inscriptions are made (ink, gold, paint, light, etc.) and in the tools used for making the inscriptions (chisel, pen, brush, pencils, stylus, etc.). (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996: 231)

Kress & Van Leeuwen (1996) have led me to ask questions of my own. As in most universities, my students are now expected to word-process their essays and theses. This means that their texts move finally from one surface (the screen) to another (the page). My questions are thus: (i) Do my students see the word-processor's properties as affecting in some way their meaning-making in written English in their academic essays or dissertations? (ii) To what extent do the printouts of students' word-processed texts indicate not only an exploitation of the meaning-making resources of written English (e.g. lexis, syntax, rhythm) but also a use of the word-processor's facilities as semiotic resources?

These are large and complex questions. In the next parts of this chapter I describe my initial attempts to obtain answers. I begin with a small-scale study which involved some of my own students.

### 9.3 Setting the scene

The 17 students on whom my study is based were all international students (i.e. they came from countries outside the UK). All were non-native speakers (NNS) of English. They were also all graduates who were following doctoral or master's degree programmes in Education. One of the requirements for admission to such programmes is several years' experience as a practitioner in the field of education. This means that the students I teach tend to be older than postgraduates at other institutions where graduates may be admitted to a master's course immediately after completing their first degrees. The students to whom my study refers ranged in age from 27 to 45 which is an age spread that is typical of many of the groups I teach. Of particular relevance to the study is the fact that, as undergraduates, the participants had all written essays by hand or, less frequently, on a typewriter, but were now composing on the computer screen. In other words, although they were accustomed in most cases to using

the computer to word-process non-academic texts such as letters, they had not previously produced academic texts on the word-processor. Sharples (1999) points out that the movement 'from page to screen' (Snyder, 1998) gradually changes the way we compose. Contrasting his own experience as an undergraduate, when revisions meant laboriously rewriting whole sections or the whole of an essay, with the comparative ease in redrafting which the word-processor affords, he concludes that he has now become a 'brick-layer', i.e. someone who polishes a text piece by piece. The focus of my study is very different, however. As the questions which I listed above indicate, my interest is in the word-processor not as a facilitating tool but as a resource for meaning-making and thus I am primarily concerned with how students who have made the transition from composing on the page to composing on the screen (and back to the page) now perceive and use the word-processor's properties – use them, that is, in combination with the semiotic resources that written English is traditionally seen to afford (e.g. lexis, syntax, punctuation).

### 9.3.1 Collecting and recording the data

My small-scale study can be broadly categorized as 'action research', that is, research undertaken by a practitioner (or practitioners) with the aim of bringing about some kind of change (Cohen & Manion, 1994). The raw data became available to me in the course of my day-to-day teaching, and relate to my perception of my role as that of a reflective practitioner. The data are of two kinds: (i) oral comments students had made in individual tutorials or seminars, when asked about their perceptions of the effect of the use of the computer on their production of academic texts; (ii) samples of the students' writing. In all, 17 students' comments were written down. (I inserted punctuation which corresponded to the oral units of sense, and gave each student a pseudonym.) The comments varied in length, ranging from 5 or 6 words in a small number of cases to over 30 in a few instances. Since I was interested in the kinds of assumption which the comments suggested, and not in statistical frequencies, I concentrated on interpreting the comments, seeking to identify the range of positions represented in them. What emerged were pointers in directions that need to be further explored in future research.

## 9.4 The students' comments

As indicated earlier, the students were unaccustomed to using the word processor to produce academic essays or theses. Their past experience had been of pen, ink and paper, or in a few cases, of typewriter and paper. However, as already mentioned, academic texts produced on the word-processor are finally printed on paper. A student's comment that 'it is easier to read, to get the sense and coherence of the whole from the printed version,' met with general agreement in a seminar. In short, the students' comments suggested that in their use of the word•processor the students aimed consciously or intuitively to bring their texts as close as possible to an idea of academic writing which preceded their writing on screen, i.e. to an idea of what was required that related to their past experience as student writers. The majority of the comments thus indicated the ways in which the word•processor was seen to help or hinder the realisation of the students' individual views of an academic text. When I attended to the students' choice of words, and to the metaphors housed within them, I then saw that the view of a text as a container of meaning, to which I referred earlier, was implicit in most of the comments. So, too, was the assumption that language is, or should ideally be, a conduit for the writer's meanings and that those meanings should not be superficial. This was the case no matter whether the students regarded the word-processor as helping them to compose or not. For example, Pemlo, who found composing on screen a problem, commented as follows:

When I compose on the screen it does look good – too good. Sometimes I end up feeling that I have written something really good when I haven't ... I haven't got into the topic.

Here 'really good' writing is treated as under threat from the superficially pleasing which can keep the writer on the surface of a topic. When that view was expressed in a seminar a number of students said it matched their experience.

Katerini, on the other hand, described the effect of composing on screen in words which suggested that the computer spatialised and objectified her meanings so that they became like objects at a distance, objects which could then be changed. In her comment (which was echoed by others) language is by implication a conduit for her thoughts.



It [the computer] makes my thoughts. They are out there, over there. I can think about them: Is this what I really mean? I can make a change, scroll back, read and see the effect of the change immediately.

This primary concern with meaning was also apparent in the large number of comments (10) which referred to paragraphing as a problem when the writer was composing on screen. Each of these comments implied that seeing their texts on the computer screen tended to deflect the writers' attention from the paragraph as a unit of meaning. For example:

On the computer a paragraph is a block of text. It is easy to forget it's an idea.

My paragraphs become a matter of size, number of lines on the screen. I think. I have written a lot, lets have a new paragraph. Of course that is the same with a page but it seems more difficult on a computer to know where to start a new paragraph.

Because the screen moves as I write I lose all sense of paragraphs ... I just have a continuous text; ideas get jumbled.

Only two of the comments which I collected referred to the temporal dimensions of written English. Rosa commented on the rhythms that the use of the keyboard can't capture:

The computer is over there, at a distance ... I use my hands and see words and sentences appear. I feel rather remote from what I am writing so I always do my first draft with pen and paper ... I write very quickly; there is a rhythm that the keyboard can't capture. I stop hearing and feeling it when I try to compose on the screen.

Christina also referred to the difficulty of hearing and feeling written English when using the computer, and linked the problem to her tendency to read only with the eye when word-processing:

A sentence can look good, not too long, grammar and spelling, OK; I have to be careful to try to hear it ... not to read it only with my eye. Then it doesn't sound right

... If I write by hand I hear the sentence more. It is easy to think a sentence is right if you only see it.

As only these two students had mentioned rhythm, which Kane (1988) and Halliday (1989) regard as an important semiotic resource, I put the following

question to all the students in a seminar: ‘Do you hear what you write in English?’ A Greek student, Athene, immediately understood the relevance of the question but replied, like the thirteen members of the group who spoke languages with alphabetic scripts: ‘Yes, but not as much as in my language.’ She recognised that some of her errors and uncertainties at the level of the sentence were connected to her failure to hear the tune on the screen or page; for example, her not being able to decide where to put connectors like ‘however’, ‘in fact’, or ‘on the other hand’, or whether to write ‘he was recently informed’ or ‘he was informed recently’. To the four Chinese-speaking students, on the other hand, my question was incomprehensible. They did not understand the paradox of a silently heard text. One commented: ‘But you mustn’t hear it. You mustn’t subvocalise.’ This kind of response is not surprising from students whose first language is logographic and tonal. Furthermore, in their earlier learning of English greater emphasis had been placed on writing and silent reading or chanting in unison than on individual speech or on listening. Consequently these students tended to bring to writing a disposition which led them to compose sentences by grammatical rule only, whereas the students familiar from childhood with alphabetic scripts had developed some awareness that written language has temporal aspects – that, as Olson (1994) points out, alphabetic scripts provide models, however distorted, of speech.

#### **9.4.1 Summary and evaluation**

I have singled out those trends in the students’ comments which have a bearing on my question: Do my students see the word-processor’s properties as affecting in some way their meaning-making in English in academic essays or theses? As the comments which I have quoted indicate, the distancing effect of keyboard and screen was a dominant theme. That effect was viewed positively by Katerini who saw her thoughts externalised, but negatively by Rosa and Christina who felt that a distanced visuality in place of the close physical engagement of hand-held pen with paper made it difficult for them to hear their texts. The aesthetic appeal of the visual text on the screen was regarded by Pemlo as a barrier to in-depth thinking, while the comments on the difficulty of paragraphing suggested that the writers either felt controlled by the size of the screen space or by the screen’s automatic accommodation of additional lines of text. Only one student

referred to the choice of fonts which the word-processor affords. Unlike the students I have quoted or referred to above, she did not link presentation to meaning. She saw a change of fonts as a means of creating a visually pleasing document. It is perhaps significant that she had a background in graphic design.

## 9.5 Analysis of samples of student writing

The students' comments on how they perceived the word-processor's properties as affecting their writing do not, of course, tell us anything about the texts which the students produced. That is the topic to which I now turn. My focus is encapsulated in the question which I formulated earlier, viz.: To what extent do the print-outs of students' word-processed texts indicate not only an exploitation of the meaning-making resources of written English (e.g. lexis, syntax, rhythm) but also a use of the word-processor's facilities as semiotic resources.

I have selected three sample texts which are representative in different ways of the kinds of academic texts which my NNS students produce. In each case I first comment on the extent to which the student has used the characteristics of written academic English to make meaning. I focus in particular on the students' texts as illustrative of the spatial and temporal features of written English which I earlier related to the properties of academic argument. I then consider what evidence there is across the three texts of the use of the word-processor's facilities as meaning-making resources.

### 9.5.2 Katerini's text

I begin with a sample text which illustrates the effective use of the semiotic resources of written English in the realisation of academic argument. The paragraph below is from a draft of Katerini's master's degree dissertation. Katerini's topic is the use of literature in TEFL/TESL contexts.

The potential contribution of literature to language learning

Brumfit and Carter (1986, p. 15) explain the distinctive role of literature. Literature, though not mundane, can provide learners with 'real' opportunities for language use and can encourage genuine performance. Kramsch (1993) also writes of literature as able to provide varied and stimulating contexts in which the learner can escape the predictable routines and oversimplified speech transactions that have been

encouraged by functional approaches to language teaching. ‘Literature can be not a script but a prompt’ (Kramsch, 1993, p. 70).

This paragraph follows a section in which Katerini presented objections to the use of literature in the teaching of ESL and EFL. She concluded that section by looking ahead to her preferred view, which the paragraph above then introduces. In stating that preferred view Katerini develops an argument which emphasises the conceptual. No matter whether the verbs are in the active or the passive voice, most of the agents are abstractions or generalizations (‘literature’; ‘functional approaches to language teaching’; ‘the learner’). Verbs such as ‘encourage’ and ‘can provide’ constitute grammatical metaphors (Halliday, 1989) in that their function is relational (i.e. they define what literature represents) and not material, while ‘escape’ suggests a mental process or condition and not a physical action. In other words, the verbs are of the kind associated with academic argument (Knapp, 1992).

However, the excerpt also represents the aspect of academic argument in the Social Sciences to which I referred earlier, viz. the impression of an individual ‘voice’ actively engaging with ideas. Katerini’s awareness of the importance of ‘voice’ is visible in the change she has now made to an earlier draft which she had given me. In that earlier draft she had written: ‘Literature can provide learners with “real” opportunities for language use and can encourage genuine performance though literature is not mundane ...’. Now she keeps the basic sense but changes the word order: ‘Literature, though not mundane, can provide learners with “real” opportunities for language use and can encourage genuine performance.’ With this new phrasing, which is reinforced by the punctuation (as indicated above), Katerini refers back to the preceding part of her chapter in which she had put the arguments against the use of literature, and so introduces the ‘voice’ of counter-argument.

The impression of a voice in the text is also achieved at the beginning of the long third sentence in which the use of ‘also’ makes a link both rhythmically and logically to the preceding sentences: ‘Kramsch also writes of literature ...’. However, the structure of this sentence rests mainly on the difference between formal written argument and informal spoken argument. In written argument passages that require reading with the eye co-exist with those where a ‘voice’ gives emphasis. In its length and absence of commas, which is in accordance

with the conventional rules of grammar relating to such kinds of relative and noun clauses, the third sentence appeals to the eye rather than the ear. ‘Voice’ can, however, be ‘heard’ again in the succinct concluding quotation in which an emphatic contrast is signalled by ‘not’ and ‘but – ‘Literature can be not a script but a prompt’ – a contrast that serves to sum up and make Katerini’s point.

### 9.5.2 Christina’s text

The following excerpt is from the first draft of Christina’s master’s degree dissertation on approaches to writing in English language teaching. I have reproduced the excerpt exactly as it appeared in her text indicating in square brackets the spaces between sentences.

Approaches to writing

Greek teachers do not let the students write an essay at an early age. [three spaces]  
Of course, only letting students write essays at a later age makes the teachers’ task easier

– they do not need to do so many corrections. [single space] Meanings would be clearer. [three spaces] But is writing made easier for students in that way? [three spaces] I doubt it. [three spaces] Students would get less practice. [three spaces] Does practice make perfect then? [three spaces] Burgess (1973) does not seem to think so. [single space] Burgess is sure we would not be able to develop children’s writing through practice.

This paragraph conveys to me a sense of the speaking voice; i.e. it invites a reading that supplies patterns of stress and intonation – a silent reading with the ear and not just the eye. This effect is created, for example, by the implicit address to the reader in ‘of course’, and in the use of question and answer. This impression of the writer in the guise of a speaker participating in a debate is strengthened for me by Christina’s use of personal subjects (e.g. ‘Greek teachers’; ‘I’; ‘Burgess’) with active verbs, in place of the nominalisations of ‘lexical density’ (Halliday, 1989) that are characteristic of academic argument’s concern with the conceptual, and especially by her choice of verbs of opinion such as ‘think’, and ‘doubt’. These features of her text suggest to me that Christina has not grasped the kinds of meaning she needs to engage with. Unlike Katerini’s, her arguments do not relate to ideas. Instead of the ‘approaches’ (i.e.

theories) referred to in her title, she offers opinions and beliefs. Her demonstration of the possibilities of written English are appropriate to that orientation but it is an orientation that indicates a misconception of what is required in an MA dissertation in Education.

### 9.5.3 Monica's text

The next excerpt is from a draft of Monica's dissertation. Monica regards the wordprocessor as helping her to structure her ideas. However, the excerpt indicates a fundamental problem. Monica writes:

In this chapter, it will be argued that the unified state of the German Empire was constructed politically and culturally along Prussian lines. The Empire was framed on the model and within the institutional pattern of the 'militaristic, paternalistic, authoritarian and quasi-feudal Prussian state machine (1). This pattern exhibited the Prussian desire for the unification of German states under Prussian hegemony and within Prussian political and cultural traditions.

Furthermore it will be argued that political and social reforms in the process of state formation were undertaken 'from above' by a small number of leading statesmen and high-ranking bureaucrats. Aristocratic German bureaucrats in particular deliberately attempted to maintain their influence within a new political structure as well as many feudalistic aspects of German society. The bureaucracy was powerful socially as well as politically in Germany.

It is clear that Monica is strongly aware of those conventions of academic writing which are earlier described metaphorically as 'spatial'. The primary grammatical forms are nominalizations and a number of verbs are in the passive voice. What is immediately most striking, though, is how concretely spatial her text is. The paragraphing visually comprises two blocks of text of equal size. This impression of a careful, symmetrical, spatial arrangement is reinforced by the fact that each paragraph contains three sentences. Furthermore, within each paragraph the sentences are of approximately the same length except for the final sentence of the second paragraph. The almost identical opening phrases: 'in this chapter it will be argued'; 'furthermore it will be argued' add to the impression of structural parallelism.

This careful structuring of the paragraphs corresponds to the kinds of meaning being made. Monica has laid the components of her 'argument' side by

side but the phrasing of the sentences which follow the first sentence of each paragraph (e.g. ‘the Empire was framed on the model ...; ‘aristocratic German bureaucrats ...’) suggests facts and not a particular focus. The final sentence of the second paragraph is shorter than the others – a variation in length which could have been used to bring an argument to a conclusion. In Monica’s text, however, it serves rather to add another fact, almost as an afterthought: ‘The bureaucracy was powerful socially as well as politically in Germany.’

The punctuation of the excerpt reinforces the impression of a text as a visual and spatial arrangement of facts rather than a nuanced argument. Punctuation is noticeably absent where it could help to give emphasis and focus. For example, the addition of commas in ‘on the model, and within the institutional pattern, of [...]’ could lend emphasis both to ‘model’ and to ‘institutional pattern’.

## 9.6 The students’ texts as ‘material objects’

The characteristics of written academic texts, which I have used above as criteria, are, of course, independent of whether or not a text is produced with pen and paper or on a typewriter or word-processor and paper. I now consider the three texts which I have discussed from a different perspective, i.e. as ‘material objects’ produced on the word-processor. I begin with some general observations that apply to all three texts before considering differences across the texts.

It might be argued that a word-processed essay or thesis chapter differs little as a material object from the typed essays and chapters which students submitted to their tutors in the past. However, I would claim that there are differences in surfaces and in ‘modes of inscription’ (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996) which herald different emphases and meanings. Firstly, the quality of the paper tends to be different. I have before me a number of typed essays from the past. The essays are on flimsier paper than the computer paper which my students use. Where the typists used underlinings for headings and usually had a choice of only lower or upper case, the word-processor now enables my students to vary font sizes, and to use ‘bold’ or ‘italics’ in place of underlinings. Furthermore, several of the typed essays which I am looking at show the use of correcting fluid; in contrast, corrections that were made to the word-processed texts reproduced above are now invisible to the reader. I may seem to be simply

stating the obvious and the trivial. I would, claim, however, that these kinds of difference are significant. The boundaries between student writer and professional writer are now overtly blurred. The word-processor's facilities enable the production of an essay or thesis which is visually indistinguishable from published academic texts such as journal articles or chapters in books. A question this raises and which calls for future exploration is: What effect, if any, might this have on students' development as writers?

Returning to the excerpts reproduced above, I note that Katerini, Christina and Monica have made particular choices from the range of options that the word-processor offers; choices which suggest that the surface of an academic text must not detract from the content represented. I refer to the use of a plain, unembellished font, of black and white to the exclusion of colour, and, in Monica's and Katerini's texts, to the choice of bold for headings.

Each of the three students has, however, also used the word-processor's properties to reinforce the particular semiotic resources of written English which they have drawn on and which, as I have shown earlier, suggest different conceptions of how to write argument.

Christina was one of the two students who had referred to the temporal aspects of writing: 'I have to try to hear it ... not to read only with my eye.' Her text suggests, however, that she has over-compensated for what she perceives as the screen's invitation to concentrate on the 'look' of a text. In an effort to 'hear' her text, and to help her reader to 'hear' it, she has used spacing in a novel way, a way that emphasises the speech-like qualities of her writing. The longer spaces between some sentences isolate those sentences: they can thus be said to function in this context like pauses for dramatic effect: they place emphasis on certain sentences, especially the questions and their answers.

Christina's choice of italics for a heading is unconventional. 'Approaches to Writing' seems to imply a concern with the aesthetics of presentation. Perhaps also, in view of its unconventionality, the italicised heading represents Christina's way of leaving her individual mark. It can then be said to be in keeping with the emphasis in her text on personal opinion as expressed, for example, in 'I doubt it' and in the prose rhythms which create such a strong impression of her speaking to the reader.



When viewed on the word-processor, Monica's text occupies a full screen. It then takes on the form of a strongly framed visual composition comprising two symmetrical blocks of text. This leads me to conclude that whereas Christina was reacting against the visual and spatial properties of the computer screen Monica was dominated by them. Her 'arguments' are impersonal arrangements of facts and her use of the word-processor visually reinforces that conception of argument.

Katerini had referred to the word-processor as enabling her to see her thoughts: 'it makes my thoughts visible.' That visibility is apparent in her text in her use of a semiotic resource which the word-processor makes available, viz. bold type for a heading: 'The potential contribution of literature to language learning.' The type combines with Katerini's linguistic choices to make explicit the central focus of the paragraph. However, Katerini said she had to produce numerous printouts in order to 'hear' the flow of her ideas.

My analyses do, of course, ignore the question of the quality of the content of the students' texts. This is in line with my primary focus which is on argument as the realisation in written English of an individually distinctive focus in an engagement with ideas. Katerini clearly held such a view and could assess in what ways the word-processor helped and did not help her to textualise it. Christina and Monica, on the other hand, made assumptions about argument which did not conform to what is expected at postgraduate level in studies of Education. Those assumptions were reflected in the different affordances which they found in the word-processor's properties.

## 9.7 Conclusion

There is, of course, no single solution to NNS student difficulties in producing written argument in English. However, I have found that giving class time to the analysis of excerpts like those above can help students, especially students like Christina and Monica, in their development as writers of argument. Such whole-class sessions need, of course, to be supplemented by one-to-one tutorial discussions of samples of each student's own writing.

Considering a text as a material object is a new focus which interests all my students. More importantly, it offers me, the teacher, a concrete, clearly visible,

basis for a discussion of the kinds of meanings being made by individual students. As I have tried to demonstrate in this chapter, it is but a short step from the 'look' of a student text to conceptions of academic argument, and to how presentational conventions might reinforce the kind of meaning-making that is expected.

This chapter has also touched on two issues of broader significance. One of those issues is the inadequacy of descriptions of written English, and especially of academic argument, which appear in course books (e.g. Swales & Feak, 1994) designed for international students. The importance of rhythm and the creation of a speaking voice in a text is neglected. Perceptions of the word-processor's role in the composition of texts is the second issue on which this chapter touches. My analyses of students' texts have led me to question the view of the word-processor as simply a useful tool which facilitates emendations and insertions and ensures a text that looks readable. While this chapter has taken only a few tentative steps towards a view of the word-processor's properties as semiotic resources, and more extensive research is clearly needed in this area, I hope I have stimulated an interest in presentation as an aspect of meaning.

I draw this chapter to its conclusion by opening it up to speculation and even fantasy. The criteria of a good essay or dissertation have changed over time and are likely to change in the future (see Russell, 1991). What role will the word-processor play in that process of change? Will voice recognition software mean, for example, that temporal, speech-like dimensions of language become more acceptable in academic papers? Will we move towards Christina's style with a corresponding change in our conceptions of academic argument? I have no answers, only possibilities for consideration, but that is, after all, the intended tenor of the whole chapter.

## CHAPTER 10

### **'Error' or ghost text? Reading, ethno poetics, and knowledge making**

#### **10.1 Introduction**

Bourdieu (1994, p. 94) asks: 'Can anyone read anything at all without wondering what it is that reading means?' His primary purpose is to draw attention to the social conditions pertaining to where, what and how readers read. In this chapter, I suggest that the 'where', 'what' and 'how' of reading are always multilayered and intertwined on the cusp of the actual and the ideological. At the level of the actual, the 'where' is a physical location, the postgraduate college in London at which I am a teacher-researcher, and the 'what' are final drafts of students' master's degree assignments. At the ideological level, however, 'where' extends to the norm-laden environment of regulation and expectation whereby 'what' is read and 'how' it is read are subject to the criteria used to assess students' writing in a particular field of study. In this chapter, that field is education and the related social sciences.

Working within this framework, I ground this chapter's specific concerns in the context of the increasing mobility of students across countries, languages and fields of study. For example, according to the January 2012 registry statistics of the college where I teach, students from hundred countries (excluding the UK) were enrolled in various courses. If one includes the students from the UK, hundreds of different languages and dialects are represented among the student body. In addition, the interdisciplinarity of the education and related social-science faculties, combined with the modularisation

of master's degree courses, often requires students to traverse disciplines that are new to them.

In responding to the diversity that is a corollary of this level of student mobility, universities in the UK have focused mainly on 'non-native speakers of English from outside the UK'. For example, since the 1970s, when the British Association of Lecturers in English for Academic Purposes drew attention to this group of students, a number of preessional and inessional courses have been developed. These courses have a range of titles that reflect course designers' or institutions' different priorities, such as English for Academic Purposes, Academic Writing, Academic Literacy, Academic And Professional Literacies, or Academic Communication. Under the widening-participation agenda that arose in the early 1990s, the college where I teach opened inessional courses in academic writing to any students who wish, or are advised by teachers, to enrol. This is an increasing trend across the UK. The main objective of preessional and inessional courses tends to be on increasing the students' resources for knowledge-making in English. Teachers who run the courses usually seek to achieve this objective by focusing on the language forms, generic structures, and discursive conventions which they consider likely to contribute to the success of students' assignments and dissertations. Take, for example, the following course overviews that appear on the Institute of Education-London's website:

### **Grammar for Academic Writing**

**Overview:** This course will focus on the language forms used in academic writing. It will explore the importance of audience and purpose and will also investigate how grammatical choices are more than just rules, but are a powerful means of enabling our readers to access complex and nuanced meaning in academic writing.

### **Dissertations 1: Abstracts and Literature Reviews**

- To look at the language and organisations commonly used in abstracts and literature review sections of the dissertation
- To consider ways in which research can be described

- To look at strategies for handling the literature and integrating the findings with the literature review<sup>1,23</sup>

As is typical of English-writing courses, the examples above aim to introduce students to an understanding of the expected normativities (Blommaert, 2011) of academic writing. In courses such as these, teachers tend to place the production of a text in a context that takes into account meaning-making, purpose, audience and ways of producing the required parts of a dissertation. The classes are clearly valued by student participants, especially since the tendency to prescription can be mitigated in actual classroom contexts. For example, a teacher of the course on Grammar for Academic Writing has spoken to me of her dialogic style of teaching in which she aims to take account of the diversity of her students' knowledge and prior experience. The verbs 'explore' and 'consider' contained in the course descriptions cited above also suggest a role for the students' voices.

Inevitably though, in view of student numbers and time constraints as well as the institutional positioning of the teachers, many preessional and insessional courses conform to a generic view of students as needy and teachers as suppliers of what is needed. Threaded through the courses is an assessment-focused narrative in which education tends to be seen as a journey from one measured level to a higher measured level, which culminates in the student being awarded a degree and with it an institutional identity. As a subject teacher, I am mindful of this narrative – and of my institutional positioning and responsibilities in relation to it – and there is nothing taught on the institution's preessional and insessional writing-in-English courses, which I consider irrelevant to a successful master's degree.

My focus as a researcher is different, though. Adopting more of a research role for this chapter, I will seek to redescribe the student journey. The description is derived from my readings of student writing, in which I view the

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<sup>1</sup>. Accessed at [www.ioe.ac.uk](http://www.ioe.ac.uk) on 31 January 2012.

writer of the text as socially and historically shaped. This perspective tends to be made invisible in the assessment of student writing, or, when visible, is regarded as evidence of deficiencies related to particular educational and linguistic histories. It is, however, a perspective that can lend complexity to the implications of student mobility, and include related issues of power. It thus invites a rethinking of issues of pedagogy within a wider framing of education that takes cognisance of the increasing diversity of student histories. It also raises questions around what counts (and what might count) as 'academic writing'. In my conclusion, I suggest briefly how the perspectives of teacher and researcher might be brought together

## 10.2 'Error' or ghost text?

My starting point is Blommaert's (2010, p. 6) reminder that:

The movement of people across space is [...] never a move across empty spaces: They [the spaces] are filled with norms and expectations, conceptions of what counts as proper, normal [...] and what does not count as such.

In this chapter, small excerpts from marked student assignments represent conceptions of what 'does not count as proper'. In each excerpt, the teacher-markers sought to draw the student writer's attention to what they saw as breaching one or other of the normativities of academic writing. I loosely group these infringements under the term 'errors' since some kind of textual remedy was called for. However, seeking a term that might both accommodate 'error' as deviation from an established norm in academic writing and also extend its implications, I arrive at the word 'style'. I choose this term because of its flexibility of reference. Although it may, for example, be conflated with conformity to particular patterns of grammar and usage (Butler, 2010), it more frequently suggests qualities that I regard as socially contextualised (such as notions of appropriacy or individuality in writing; that is, implicit normativities, in, for example, writing an argument). Comments on style may also resist explicit norm-based description when they mainly reflect the readers' socially formed,

biographical expectations. Examples that I have encountered in teacher-markers' comments include: 'an elegant style'; 'the writing is pedestrian'; 'a lively piece that held my interest.'

Put metaphorically, my aim is to read for possible ghost texts in teacher-markers' perceptions of errors of style; i.e. to look for what 'error' makes invisible in the text. Although my readings are speculative, I hope that they will draw attention – both theoretical and pedagogical – to ways of reading student writing, that are grounded in an awareness of student mobility across countries and educational systems. Since such mobility is a feature of higher education in many countries, my suggested way of reading may perhaps raise questions and challenges for further discussion.

### 10.3 Seeking a methodological frame

The ghost texts I discuss emerge from a reading of the final drafts of master's assignments written by three students. All three students had been educated outside the UK and were categorised institutionally as 'EU/international' students for whom English was a 'second language'. A requirement of the assignment was that it include references to their own countries. In each case, the teacher-marker suggested that the student's text infringed norms of academic style in some small way.

From my positioning as a writing teacher, I attempted to help the students to remedy these perceived errors of style. However, to describe the ghost texts that I saw as being obscured by the normative focus of the original marker of the assignment, I constructed a methodological frame with which to analyse each piece of work. This works as follows:

- I begin by looking for the student writer in the text, an analytical concept that I intend as a contrast to assessment-shaped, ascribed identities (such as MA candidate).
- I then introduce multimodal semiosis (or multimodal knowledge-making) as an alternative to viewing text simply as a set of linguistic/grammatical forms.

- Finally I consider ethno poetics, which has the potential to link student mobility to the sociocultural-sociopolitical histories suggested by certain textual or 'poetic' features of the ghost texts.

#### 10.4 Reading the student writer in the text

In this process, I seek to replace technocratic, assessment-related student identities with an emphasis on the student writer as a 'textualised self'. I owe this description to Bartholomae (1985) and consider it appropriate in its focus on the written product as an integration of text and self. I draw on Kress's (2010) statement that a text represents the writer's (conscious and intuitive) 'interests' at the moment of writing, both in order to extend Bartholomae's description and to include the notion of subjectivity. However, in this situation, subjectivity does not denote a Romantic conception of the writer as engaged in self-expression. I associate it instead with imagination as conceptualised in writing on academic literacies; that is, imagination as socially constructed, rather than as an inner mental capacity (see Kenway & Fahey, 2009).

When linked to imagination in this way, subjectivity can function as a contrast to a conception of identity as static and ascribed and can accommodate the self's 'interest' (Kress, 2010) as imagined at the moment of writing (and the teacher's 'interest' at the moment of reading).

As I hope to show, this perspective on subjectivity/imagination can lead also to a view of the writer as having been, and still being, ideologically and affectively shaped within a wider context of national and international histories and interconnections (as suggested, for example, in Appadurai, 1996, 2004). It can thus give a different resonance to errors of style in student texts in the context of a university, in which the mobility of students is reflected in a marked diversity in students' linguistic and educational histories.



## 10.5 Knowledge making as multimodal semiosis

I then focus on knowledge making as the social production of signs. Here I find relevance in Kress's (2010) social-semiotic view of signs as produced by individuals representing particular social relations in specific social contexts. To this I add multimodality. Thus, where Kress sees writing as a separate mode and multimodality as primarily a combination of writing and image, I approach writing itself as multimodal; that is, as multimodal semiosis. When a student text is read from this perspective, the whole text comes into view, as not just words, but as a sign constructed from a set of multimodal resources; that is, the handwriting or a selected font, the layout, the choice of surface (determined by a student's access to particular kinds of paper, computers and printers, etc.), as well as the sentence rhythms and sound images (such as alliteration or onomatopoeia). These can all be read as signifiers, and can act as readers' 'prompts' (Kress, 2010), in ways that are very different from the promptings of generally accepted linguistic norms. Consequently there is, as I hope to show, a narrowing of the conventional gap between academic writing and poetry's devices.

A quote from De Certeau (1984) – in which he criticises the scriptural (or written) economy as oppressive of the oral/poetic aspects of writing (which are nonetheless present) – leads me back to the student in the text, and to issues of power. De Certeau writes:

The place from which one speaks is outside the scriptural enterprise [...] but the voice will insert itself into the text as a mark or trace – a [...] ghost in the scriptural economy. (1984, p. 155, 158)

Freeing possible ghost voices into voices that might be heard (Blommaert, 2005) by teachers and researchers, is a primary motive for the readings I suggest in analysing the three student texts below.

## 10.6 Ethnopoetics as methodology

Finally, I widen the methodological frame by turning briefly to ethnopoetics (Hymes, 1996). Ethnopoetics was originally used to describe oral narratives and folk art from 'other' cultures, but I would argue that it is also applicable to written texts and, in this paper, to a different reading of what the teacher-markers perceived as errors in the selected samples of student writing. While the 'ethno' in ethnopoetics needs further consideration in its relation to conceptions of culture and the cultural, the word 'poetics' can direct attention to the undervalued or ignored textual elements; i.e. the ghost texts, that may suggest sociocultural/sociopolitical histories.

Blommaert (2006) uses applied ethnopoetics to signal the meeting in a text of two systems of making meaning. However, for me, an ethnopoetic approach to student writing can primarily serve to highlight what tends to be made invisible by the normativities of academic writing. Using ethnopoetics as a methodology can also address the politics of difference. It can give voice to an individual student as a social individual with a history, rather than as someone who is simply ignorant of how to write in English in acceptable academic style. Ethnopoetics is therefore particularly pertinent given the diversity that has resulted from student mobility across countries and educational systems.

## 10.7 Ghost hunting in student texts

### 10.7.1 Example one: Christina's text

The text below appeared in an assignment by a student whom I refer to as Christina.<sup>4</sup> The assignment was on the teaching of English in the country which Christina comes from – an EU country which I will refer to as Zeta. Christina wrote:

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<sup>4</sup> Text in this section of the chapter draws on my discussion of Christina's work in Scott (forthcoming).

[Zetean] teachers do not let the students write an essay at an early age. Of course, only letting students write essays at a later age makes the teachers' task easier. They do not need to do so many corrections. Meanings would be clearer. But is writing made easier for students in that way? I doubt it. Students would get less practice. Does practice make perfect then? Burgess (1973) does not seem to think so. Burgess is sure we would not be able to develop children's writing through practice.

In this instance, the teacher-marker singled out aspects of the text as being too close to speech and therefore as stylistically inappropriate in an academic argument. She highlighted the phrase 'of course', and also the question and answer sequences such as, 'But is writing made easier for students in that way? I doubt it. Students would get less practice. Does practice make perfect then?' I read the teacher's comment as resting on those linguistic descriptions of academic argument which emphasise impersonality and a distanced rationality. A primary example of how this might be achieved textually is the use of nominalisation to achieve lexical density (Halliday, 1989). As a teacher, I would want the student to be helped to convert her everyday way of arguing into an academic argument, and also to appreciate how linguistic conventions can contribute to the kind of knowledge being made.

However, my focus in this chapter is on ghost texts. It is here that Hymes's reference to Basil Bernstein's writing experiment with postal-worker students becomes relevant. Hymes (1996, p. 185) quotes Bernstein who said of the experiment: 'One day I took a piece of student's continuous text and broke it up into lines. The piece took on a new and vital meaning.'

I use Christina's text to illustrate the potential of this ethnopoetic approach. When separated into lines as shown below, the rearrangement converts the points being made into a dramatisation of thinking and rethinking in progress. Each line has its own space and weight, while the spaces between can be filled with the reader's emphases, meanings, and questions.

[Zetean] teachers do not let the students write an essay at an early age.

Of course, only letting students write essays at a later age makes the teachers' task easier

They do not need to do so many corrections.

Meanings would be clearer.

But is writing made easier for students in that way? I doubt it.

Students would get less practice.

Does practice make perfect then?

Burgess (1973) does not seem to think so.

Burgess is sure we would not be able to develop children's writing through practice.

I want to focus on the last five lines, which represent different voices – ranging from strong opinion ('I doubt it') with a strongly asserted justification, to the different tone used for the two references to Burgess. My suggested reading is that the move from 'Burgess (1973) does not seem to think so' to 'Burgess is sure' points to the student's struggle to find her agency, her voice, in relation to Burgess whose academic authority is emphasised by the inclusion of the publication date, 1973. This leads me to ask: Should 'does not seem to think so' be taken to refer to an uncertainty in Burgess's statement of his position, or in the student's reading of Burgess, or both? And what of 'Burgess is sure'? Where in this question, and in the excerpt as a whole, is the student writer positioning herself as a teacher from Zeta on a course in London?

It seems relevant that in the main part of the essay, drawing on Burgess, the student treats Zetean classrooms as needing, in a sense, to be transformed into English classrooms in London. Is this the kind of transformation which we UK-based tutors assume to be the primary purpose of mobility across educational systems; that is, that students should take what is offered in the UK and if possible transport it, as is, to another national context? In my reading, the notion of a one-way journey is complicated by the uncertainties in the voice that emerges in the last five lines of Christina's rearranged text.

### 10.7.2 Example two: Jacob's text

Jacob, a student from a small country off the coast of Africa, which I refer to as Mella, produced a draft of his introduction to an essay on education and international development.<sup>35</sup> Here is a brief excerpt from his first paragraph:

Development has the meaning lent to it (Rist, cited in Paquette, 1994) [...]  
Development becomes meaningful only if it implies change in technology and an increase in material resources. But development cannot be reduced to material productivity or quantitative growth; it depends to a large extent on how equitably potential benefits of productivity are distributed.

The use of abstract nouns relevant to the field of study, the impersonal sentence constructions, the inclusion of a carefully set out reference, the introduction of a counter argument – these are all familiar aspects of writing as presented in academic-English writing courses, or, to adapt Myers (1990) for my own purposes, in the 'narrative of social science as science.'

However, on being advised to, 'put your own country in the introduction', the student rewrote (and reformatted) the introduction using a more intricate font:

*This paper proposes to problematise the relationship between education and national development within the Human Capital and Modernization theories, in [Mella]. Both, the Modernization and Human capital theories, inform development strategies in [Mella]. The Modernization theory postulates that education is a vehicle of national development and economic growth (Fagerlind and Saha, 1987: 15). This confidence in the efficacy of education as the agent of modernisation is reinforced by Human Capital theory, which carries an economic focus within Modernisation theory. In the first section of this essay I will examine the strengths and weaknesses of the Human Capital theory as an offshoot of the Modernisation theory. The second section uses examples from the Mellian experience of development to demonstrate the positives and negatives of relying on the*

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<sup>5</sup> I have written about this example before (see Scott, 2005), but in this paper I draw on ethnopoetics to provide a different framing.

*above theories to draw out development strategies. I draw from the Mellian experience for two reasons:*

- ☞ *being myself a Mellian, it is the situation I can best relate to;*
- ☞ *the Mellian economic success story has a reverse side to it that is hardly talked about in official documents.*

The teacher-reader considered this a better introduction but commented that the English was 'clumsy'. However, I would suggest that the clumsiness is largely the consequence of small punctuation errors (such as the comma in 'Both, Modernization and Human Capital Theory'), which as a teacher I would simply help the student to correct. However, as a researcher, I would argue that these errors point to a ghost text that can be read as indicating that Jacob, as the writer-in-the-text, continues to attach primary importance to theory. I base this conclusion on the following aspects of his redrafted text:

- Jacob retains the academic conventions used in his first draft; for example, abstract nouns still predominate, such as: 'strengths and weaknesses of the Human Capital theory'; 'the Modernisation theory'; 'development strategies'.
- The comma before 'in Mella' (in 'Modernization theories, in Mella') converts the phrase to the status of an aside.
- The initial 'both', followed by commas visually places the two theories (modernization and human capital) in their own space in the second sentence, and serves to give heightened importance to the theories.

I note in particular, though, the choice of the verb 'talked about' in the reference to 'official' Mellian documents. There is a marked contrast between the phrase 'talked about' and the formal academic register Jacob uses to write about theory in the first draft of his introduction. It is a contrast that, I suggest, implicitly places the Mellian documents in the realm of the less academic, i.e. the less theorised.

There is also, perhaps, a specifically sociocultural–sociopolitical way in which Jacob has followed the instruction to put his own country in his text.

There was a change of font from the Times New Roman used in his first draft to a more intricate font in his revised version. But perhaps the most marked of the changes was the replacement of bullet points with the Sanskrit symbol OM, which stands for the source of all existence.

I would argue that economics, in relation to national histories and international interconnections, may be at work in the text, evident especially in Jacob's emphasis on theory and his use of 'talked about' in his reference to Mellian documents. Coming from a small island, without a well-stocked university library, Jacob may have had his own agenda – related to getting knowledge from a former colonising power and to avoiding writing much about his own country?

So, while Christina seemed uncertain as to how to relate her voice to the voice of a published academic authority when considering English teaching in Zeta, Jacob would, it seems, confidently ascribe authority to the ideas he has received during his course in London but is hesitant to attribute the same level of authority to his experience in his home country.

### **10.7.3 Example three: Myra's text**

I will call the third student Myra, and her country of origin, Kanda. She was also following a postgraduate course in education but her response to her geographic and academic mobility seems different from either Christina's or Jacob's. In her dissertation proposal Myra described her intended research as follows:

Education in Kanda is characterised by its banding system – schools are categorised from band one (for the highest achievers) to band five (for the lowest achievers). In the functioning of this categorisation, learners are compared, hierarchised and differentiated in terms of their academic achievement Teachers are directed to bring and keep student performance within the lines of legitimacy (Bernstein, 1972: 173). However, this process of normalisation which leaves many underachievers alienated or excluded in schooling is seldom challenged.

My research precisely charts how the literate culture of schooling is 'naturalised' on the grounds of the learners' difference in their command of English as the medium

of instruction and how 'literacy' in schooling signposts learners to distinctive ways of orienting to the world and maps them onto different ways of taking meaning.

Like me, several teacher-readers evaluated this text positively. We noted that Myra skilfully weaves the theoretical into her account of Kandian educational practice in, for example, her references to Bernstein, the Foucauldian echoes in her use of the word 'naturalised', and the use of terms such as 'normalisation'. In fact, her text can be said to be saturated with the educational discourse that is characteristic of a particular ideological perspective.

A small error was also noted, however: one of the teacher-readers placed a squiggly line under 'compared, hierarchised and differentiated' and 'tone this down' was written in the margin of the text. This 'error' of style led me to look for a ghost text. I read Myra's deployment of the three adjoined verbs ('compared, hierarchised and differentiated') as indicating her strength of feeling. I see this as having been visually reinforced by the use of brackets in 'band one (for the highest achievers) to band five (for the lowest achievers)'. I suggest, therefore, that Myra is angered by the hierarchical process of differentiation and discrimination, and is intent on bringing about change in educational practice in her country of origin so that the 'alienated or excluded' might be liberated.

## **10.8 An overview of three ghost texts and the questions they prompt**

I have presented three different ghost texts representing three different ways in which I read the student writers' mobility across countries as possibly having shaped their writing. As Blommaert (2005) has observed, individuals write both in and from a place.

While Christina is uncertain of the relevance of her knowledge and experience in Zeta vis-a-vis the authority of a text published in the UK, Jacob from Mella tends to ascribe to the ideas encountered during his course an authority which is over and above his knowledge of his country. For him,



mobility includes acquiring and valuing the theory offered on his London-based course.

Myra, on the other hand, views the theory she is encountering on her course as a weapon that she can use to turn the tables on educational administrators in Kanda. Her 'precise charting' suggests the accuracy of her mappings in contrast to the imperfections of theirs. I would suggest that the intensity of Myra's sense of injustice almost certainly contributed to her understanding of the readings she encountered on her course. Unlike Christina or Jacob, Myra brings her reading and her concerns into a collaborative relationship. But if the norms of academic argument were strictly applied, might she be in danger of substituting assertion for a carefully argued case?

This brings me to a key question, derived from my readings of the ghost texts, namely: what might the instruction to 'refer to your own country' mean textually if one regards the writer-in-the text as having been shaped by national histories and international inter-relations? Can only the distanced be included under academic writing? Why not a satire? A debate? A poem? I am reminded of Fiona English's (2011) work on 'regenring' (which encourages writers to bend genres including academic essays). However, what I am suggesting focuses primarily on rethinking what 'education' might mean in place of the current emphasis in the UK on 'performativity' (see Ball, 2003); i.e. a focus on a narrow range of forms and functions rather than on knowledge-making.

## 10.9 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have sought to suggest that perceived lapses in style, when analysed ethnopoetically, might be more appropriately conceived as ghost texts; that is, as texts which are made invisible or ghostly by a readers' focus on the conventions of academic writing. With an ethnopoetic lens, errors might become, not ghosts to be exorcised, but 'fertile facts' (Virginia Woolf in Gordon, 2006, p. 366) which might lead us to consider the possible merging of individual, national and international histories and structures of feeling (Williams, 1977).

The chapter has focused on the writing of students from outside the UK. I would hope, though, that the chapter might provoke a discussion of individual and national histories and interrelations as they affect all students in the UK and in other countries. In fact, I would like to suggest that future research take further the issues around how 'academic writing' is read and does so in a partnership involving students and teachers working on joint projects in several countries.

But what of classroom practice? I have indicated where I shared the teacher-markers' perceptions of error and I have stated that I am not rejecting the norms of academic writing out-of-hand. What I would suggest, though, is that the distinction between teaching and research should be recognised as unhelpful. I do not simply mean that all teaching can be said to involve individual research. What I envisage is a change in the institutional positioning of the able individuals who currently teach courses in academic and professional literacies. In spite of their range of knowledge and experience, these teachers tend to be regarded in many UK universities as providing a 'fixit' service for student writers rather than as individuals with knowledge and experience which could be valuable on academic writing courses (as well as disciplinary courses) that were grounded in attention to the sociocultural–sociopolitical histories of established norms.

But what I would like to emphasise even more strongly is the importance of the student's voice, that is, of not disabling it but allowing it to be heard in discussions of diversity, in which students' ideas are seen as a resource and both students and teachers are seen as teacher–researchers exploring the educational possibilities of student mobility across countries, languages and educational systems with all the risks

This brings me back to the technocratic educational narrative with which I began, viz., education as a journey from one measured level of achievement to a higher level. In its most decontextualised (i.e. dehistoricised and deterritorialised) mode in the context of formal assessment, the 'risk' of the journey for students (and teachers) tends to be conflated with 'playing it safe'

i.e. attempting to conform to stated assessment norms. However, in this chapter I have offered an ethnopoetic reading of student writing which is sensitive to time-space and opens up possibilities for risk taking in a generative sense. Consequently I would hope that my focus on student writing as affectively and ideologically shaped by national and international histories and inter-relations, might encourage teachers to ground their reading of student texts in the larger socio-cultural-sociopolitical aims and concerns so often neglected in education when student writing is the topic of discussion.

But finally who is this 'I' that has read and commented on these small pieces of student writing (Cooper, 1998), and has attempted to make new knowledge for herself as a teacher-researcher? What are my ghost texts? I will not attempt to answer this question here, but in keeping with the paper's emphasis on the poetic and implicit I will end with a quotation from T.S. Eliot. I hope that, decontextualised from the poem as a whole and recontextualised in this paper, it will work, as poetry, to suggest the importance of ghost texts to knowledge-making in reading and writing.

When I count, there are only you and I together  
But when I look ahead up the white  
road

There is always another one walking beside you [...]

But who is that on the other side of you? <sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> T.S. Eliot (1922), *The Wasteland*, lines 360–365, in *Collected Poems 1902-1962*. New York: Harcourt Brace

# Chapter 11

## Conclusion:

### Voice as form of attention in reading student writing differently

#### 11.1 Introduction

In the past decades, my lens has become students' 'voice', to the point where it functions as a form of attention. (Highmore, 2006, on De Certeau). Van der Aa & Blommaert (2011:332) write that as 'voice [can be] an opportunity for learners and (...) a target for education, [but] also (...) an obstacle and constraint for many individuals and groups', it is important to investigate the *conditions* which make voice possible

In this dissertation these conditions have emerged as the historical conditions under which a text has come into being as well as my own historically shaped view on how to read student writing. Paying attention to voice has led me over time to patterns in student writing that index particular socio-cultural histories (conditions) which I have begun to take into account in seeking to understand the production of meaning (consequences) in the text.. By considering the larger histories that might be at work in shaping the students' texts, I have noted patterns of a certain kind and thus how voice as a form of attention can lead to reading texts differently.

What often applied in academic writing in my past experience was an equation of Romantic self expression with agency. In other words students were asked 'to put themselves' in their writing, to establish a sort of identity and selfhood, which did not, however, work to remove authority and constraint. To me it is the constraints of this notion of voice which has kept lots of student voices inaudible (or unreadable). In this study I have come to look elsewhere for voice,

viz, in implicit patterns of organisation, rather than in explicit demands for voicing.

## 11.2 Voicing the text

Voicing the text represents my attempt in all the chapters to focus on the student writer in the textual object – not in terms of the extent of the writer’s appropriation of expected norms, which is Bartholomae’s focus (Bartholomae & Petrosky, 1986), but as an attempt to give the student writer voice; i.e to allow their interest and their history to be ‘heard’ in ways that give them agency. In each paper I have looked for the implicit in a text: for example, by changing the patterning in ethnopoetic fashion (Hymes, 1996) in one case or by finding the student voice in the breaching of linguistic or textual norms in the setting out of references. My readings have increasingly transgressed the linguistic boundaries that conventionally apply in the reading of academic texts as I came to find the poetic and multimodal important in identifying and interpreting voice, including in word-processed texts. ..

I was in fact attempting to borrow and apply Blommaert’s (2005: 5) description of voice as the ability to be heard, i.e. understood, and was trying to hear the student writers’ voices other than through the conceptions of academic texts to be found in the many ‘How to’ books. But Blommaert (2008: 23) also states that voice, as the capacity to be understood, requires semiotic resources. This introduces issues around norms and power. Individuals may move across boundaries of different kinds-- class, gender, region and nationality, but what counted as a resource in one context may be seen as a deficit in another (functional relativity, see Hymes, 1966). This leads Blommaert to argue that if a text were viewed as a sociolinguistic object then more attention might be given to new ways of assessing a student’s writing; i.e. to an assessment of the resources the students have and a consideration of what kind of repertoire would give them a voice educationally. The same issues could apply to teachers – what kind of repertoire might enable them to help their students have voice? Such a move from standard tests of competence seems desirable in view of the increasing mobility of students in higher education. However, this means that I do not consider grammar, syntax, genre as necessarily antithetical to voice. As

Hodge & Kress (1988) argue, there is almost nothing, lexis, syntax, rhythm, layout; that cannot contribute to semiosis; i.e. to voice.

### 11.3 A problematic concept?

Voicing the text is, however, a problematic concept, as I have already suggested. Voice is often linked to discourses which associate it with expressivism and an untrammelled selfhood. However, associating voice with the capacity to be heard rather links it to social interaction and communication, and to issues of power and authority, the individual being a ‘social individual’.

Another criticism of the use of voice in relation to written text rests on its metaphoric association with speech, i.e. on a perceived lack of technical specificity. The same criticism is made of Bakhtin’s ‘utterance’ (1986 [1952- 53]). It is, however, the lack of confinement within narrow definitions which I value in both voice and utterance. Furthermore, in an association of metaphors, voice can also borrow from addressivity and the mobility of the word and the text across TimeSpace (Bakhtin, 1984 [1929]); and so histories, individual, national and international, can fall within the compass of ‘voice’. But for me the primary significance of ‘voice’ is as a mark of the writer in the text – the writer with a history, whose use of language suggests more than accuracy or inaccuracy in the use of grammar. This means looking for the ‘implicit’ multimodally. But this does not mean that I consider grammar, syntax, genre as necessarily antithetical to voice. As Hodge & Kress (1988) argue, there is almost nothing, lexis, syntax, rhythm, layout that cannot contribute to semiosis, and so offer the analyst and teacher more than does a focus on a text as a narrowly conceived linguistic object.

## 11.4 The Golden Notebook

The first paper in this collection uses *The Golden Notebook* (Lessing, 1962) as a resource. In this final section I return to that book, this time to the inner golden notebook. In that inner book, framed, as all the notebooks are, by a conventional novel, Anna Wulf comes to hear the voices she had ignored. My question is: what might muffle or suppress the voices we need to hear? I would suggest as primary ‘suppressors’, bureaucratic and market-driven categorisations which hide

CHAPTER 11: CONCLUSION: VOICE AS FORM OF ATTENTION IN READING STUDENT WRITING DIFFERENTLY diversity in their manner of attempting to capture it – viz. ‘international’, ‘home’ and ‘EU’ students, and the ascribed identities in assessment classifications, e.g. first class BA graduate, and categories such as ‘non-native’ speaker of English’, which can invite stereotyping and constructions of learner deficit.

In the dissertation I have tried to offer instead a view of voice in the text as a voice to be heard in its complexity - a heteroglossic and historic voice that converts the notion of text from an explicitly teachable linguistic object to a sociolinguistic object; i.e. a historically formed object involved in issues of power and authority.

I conclude with a quotation from Blommaert (2008a: 427) , which focuses on real humans and actual uses of language in actual contexts:

It is too easy to say that language serves as an instrument for producing meanings. The essential question is: which particular meanings? And how do people actually use language to produce meanings? And how do they come to do that in so many different ways ?

I read this quotation as pointing to the importance of future research around ‘voicing the text’ in the university with its international realities and aspirations— research to which I hope still to contribute.

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## SUMMARY

This book mainly comprises a selection of published papers which I wrote between 1992 and 2012. The papers together constitute a chronicle which represents my coming to read university students' written texts differently over time from within my institutional positioning as a teacher-researcher at the Institute of Education

University of London. At the core of the book is a criticism of the view of a written text as an explicitly teachable linguistic object. I focus instead on ways of conceptualizing the student writer in the text as a 'historical body' with a repertoire of resources and expectations which a multimodal reading of the student's text can make accessible for interpretation and discussion.

The chapters include examples of student writing. Some of the students were following courses in Education which I taught. As the chapters cover 21 years they represent my response to new ideas I was encountering.

The concept that emerged most strongly for me over time was 'voice' - in all its complexity, i.e. as the ability to be heard (Blommaert) which raises issues regarding what teacher-readers of student texts may not 'hear' in a text, together with the possible tensions of the voice in the text with the semiotic resources that students need to learn in order to be heard in assessment terms.

