

## **Paying Attention**

### **Katharine McMahon, RLF Fellow at the University of Hertfordshire, writes about her experiences.**

The Royal Literary Fund has set up a scheme which places writing 'Fellows' in universities and colleges all over the UK to provide expertise in Practical (as opposed to Creative) Writing. The purpose of the scheme is twofold; to support students in their practical and academic writing, and to give writers, struggling to exist in the fiercely commercial world of modern publishing, secure funding and a congenial working environment.

Though I had read glowing reports about the success of the scheme in other institutions, I had my reservations when I started work as a Fellow with the Humanities Department at the University of Hertfordshire. I thought I might have nothing to do, that I would feel an outsider, and that working with students on a one-to-one basis exploring practical writing skills might prove unsatisfactory. What I have discovered instead is a deep commitment to the scheme among students and staff dedicated to improving writing skills. Their openness and receptivity is utterly engaging, and has in turn drawn from me skills and strengths that have been latent or underused

Students come with an unexpectedly diverse range of issues: a first year mature student doesn't know where to begin with a critical analysis; a third year is frustrated by constant criticisms that her essays lack structure; someone else breezes in seeking instant help with filling in an application form; an MA student up against a deadline comes for a bit of reassurance; another student makes an appointment whenever she reaches a new stage in her essay. There are no rules and no judgements and the principle is that no issue is too trivial or complex to explore.

During the tutorial we can discuss the minutiae of punctuation and syntax, the requirements of a good introduction or the thrust of an entire argument. The session is directed by the student's concerns or needs. Probably the most valuable part of what I have to offer is undivided attention. The RLF contract allows me to dedicate two days a week to spending up to an hour at a time with an individual student, and this is a rare luxury in any tier of modern education. My experience as a writer gives me confidence with words and a firm belief that there is always a simple way of expressing even the most complicated idea. I have learnt through bitter experience the value of the drafting process and the pains and pleasure experienced by all writers on the road to creating a polished piece of prose.

One student asked: 'Isn't it cheating, getting help with your essays?' It's interesting that he should separate writing skills from the rest of his studies, and regard the issue of style and structure as a nut to be cracked by the lone student - a view that perhaps echoes the feelings of so many students who regard the process of writing an essay as an unfathomable mystery.

The enthusiastic response by students to my appointment here is no accident, but reflects the willingness of the Humanities Department to embrace the RLF scheme. I have been linked to a member of the department who maintained contact with me during the months before the start of the fellowship, ensured that by the time I arrived office facilities were in place, and canvassed the support of the rest of the department. Publicity has been a priority and every possible avenue explored to make students aware of my presence. I was invited to speak at staff meetings and lectures. Tutors encouraged students to book tutorials with me and have been generous about sharing concerns.

My appointment as an RLF Fellow has done much to make me feel valued as a writer, and this has given my own work a renewed sense of vitality and purpose, which I hope in turn to pass on to students. We have in common the desire to find a voice and give clear expression to the exploration and communication of ideas.

(Written for the *English Subject Centre Newsletter*).