

**Royal Literary Fund Fellowships:**  
**The Human Exchange**

A study commissioned by The Royal Literary Fund

by

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## **Introduction**

The communication undertaken by Royal Literary Fund Writing Fellows is primarily a matter of Fellows' giving technical assistance to students to meet the linguistic demands they encounter in an academic environment. Fellows are there to support and clarify the process of writing and their activity proceeds according to a professional discipline and within the guidelines laid down by the Royal Literary Fund. However, the one-to-one sessions that Fellows are privileged to offer and students to receive take place in an academy that is perceived as increasingly impersonal and pressured by financial and other circumstances. The transaction that occurs between Fellow and student therefore has a dimension beyond the technical.

This study constitutes an exploration of the nature and value of the essentially private exchange that takes place over a period of time within the Fellow's room. While Fellows are neither intended nor trained to act as counsellors or therapists and their brief has no place for the establishment of intimacy or personal friendship with mentees, their position and the nature of their work necessarily involve the establishment of personal relationships. This study investigates the nature of such relationships, with a view to exploring and evaluating methods that work best to establish the trust and confidence of mentees. Students confide in the Fellows information about the underlying problems which cause, for example, writer's block, difficulties of expression, undue diffidence, grammatical confusion and unease in the face of the academic system which judges students, sometimes in terms they find incomprehensible. In eliciting and responding to such information, Fellows are placed in a position that calls for a particular balance of professionalism, respect and empathy.

This study seeks to shed some light on whether and why writers are especially suited to the task. What are the qualities that writers might bring to the unconventional role of supporting student writing, rather than teaching creative writing or literature? This issue is of particular relevance because the scheme is sometimes seen as open to criticism in that it employs writers beyond what is assumed to be their 'proper sphere' i.e. the teaching of creative writing and literature. However, writers are experts in language as the common medium of communication and practitioners of a craft potentially adaptable to all fields of academic endeavour: what qualities do they bring to the tuition of students? Do writers excel in their ability to evince clarity in their students, through listening skills? In their one-to-one

discussions, are they demonstrably able to make a difference to the student's perceptions and understanding, because they bring uniquely writerly qualities to the task? If so, what are the parameters of these (since writers differ as individuals do)?

I have spoken to Fellows and ex-Fellows about their experience of the scheme: with only one exception, all those who have shared their experience have seen the soul of the Royal Literary Fund Writing Fellowship programme as residing in the one-to-one sessions lasting an hour or half an hour, and continuing over a period of several weeks or months. Fellows speak of the 'privilege' and 'pleasure' of sharing this time with those whose work they support. Often they comment on the process as a two-way exchange in which they receive information about unfamiliar spheres of intellectual activity and which they would probably not have sought for themselves: the law of tort, for example, or the views of Wittgenstein or the habits of mites in carpets. However exotic or bizarre the minutiae of the thought-world they enter, the writer, like the humanist, is accustomed to inhabit a mental universe in which 'nothing human is alien' to her or him. This grist to the writer's mill balances the meeting of minds in a potentially radical way, for, while both mentor and mentee are students of language, the writer tends to be omnivorously curious. This reciprocity is certainly part of the secret of the perceived egalitarianism in the relationship between mentor and mentee. That is, the 'eureka' feeling may be experienced to some degree on both sides.

To find exactly what students take away from their encounter with Royal Literary Fund Writing Fellows, above and beyond the power to write an essay or put together a curriculum vitae, it seemed to me wise to consult the students themselves. The core of this study I have titled 'Voices' as it contains extracts from the views of forty-two students who filled in a questionnaire asking them to describe what they had experienced in consultation with the Royal Literary Fund Writing Fellow. The questionnaire appears at the end of the study.

I have also incorporated the results of a survey of thirty-two Fellows' methods of tuition, together with their detailed comments on how sessions work; how the space is used; and how the nature and use of this space affects the exchange. The questionnaire (mirroring the student questionnaire and also printed at the end of this study) sounds out Fellows about the dangers of undue intimacy, dependency and therapy. I have woven in elements of their observations where these are most pertinent.

What emerges is a polyphony that, in all its different styles, carries with it a unanimous message as to the value of the scheme. At the centre of this is the act of careful, skilful listening. One Fellow comments that, in one-to-ones, the ‘tutor addresses deficiencies in students’ writing directly, rather like a music teacher’. This analogy is peculiarly felicitous in combining the aspects of listening attentiveness, shared focus on the specifics of technique and the Fellow’s patient attunement to student difficulties and requirements. One-to-one sessions are intensive and concentrated. Every Fellow recalls occasions on which mentees exclaimed that this was the first time they had been listened to attentively so that the sometimes labyrinthine confusions exhibited by their work could be patiently unpicked and they could assimilate the skills necessary to clarify and unify their argument. The resolution (or partial resolution) of problems that manifest as academic difficulties may have a radical effect on the person in building confidence and self-respect. There is a real sense in which the Royal Literary Fund is granting a voice.

## VOICES

### **The Ethos and Experience of One-to-One Royal Literary Fund Writers’ Meetings with Students**

#### **1: ‘A Private Space’**

One of the thoughtful students who responded to my questionnaire opened her remarks by distinguishing the one-to-one sessions from her academic classes by their provision of ‘A private space in which to express doubts, anxieties and perceived shortcomings—very hard to do in a group’. All the others echoed the sense of security she expressed: ‘They [Fellows] focus on problems or interests which one might not be willing to share with too many people’. Another speaks of ‘reassurance’ and ‘no embarrassment in asking even simple questions’. Yet another observes that ‘you can say [or ask] what you want without worrying about looking stupid in front of your peers’.

This word ‘embarrassment’ or its synonyms recurs in all the responses and troubles one with the realization that many of the students carry with them painful burdens of anxiety and even shame which are intensified by a system which cannot—because of lack of time and high staff-student ratios—give personal attention to the problems of individuals. Such a pervasive sense of anxiety should not surprise us, given these factors and the universal pressure to achieve high grades. Students constantly feel judged. When we consider that many of the undergraduates in all Faculties arrive at university without appropriate grammatical skills, we should rather wonder at the fact that the majority cope as well as they do than be surprised that many find themselves in a state of unease and shame. Such feelings are present not only in those students perceived as academically weak, but also in those who seem on the surface successful and optimistic.

As one respondent to the questionnaire put it, ‘s/he’ was ‘not affraid [sic] to ask questions’. The sense of safety is provided in the first instance by the Fellow’s occupation of private space. By private space, I mean the four walls of the office, with a closed door and the assurance of total confidentiality. In a more public space, students would not feel comfortable in confiding the problems they encounter with written work. But this ‘private space’ is also to be understood in terms of the atmosphere engendered by the Fellow: a sense of personal welcome and support in

which the student can feel at ease. Members of staff and postgraduate students also benefit from the enclosure and privacy the Royal Literary Fund secures for them. Academics beset by writer's block or the conundrum presented by publishers' rejection letters which contradict one another require a strictly guarded confidentiality and a private space in order to open up about these problems outside an environment which regards admission of weakness with contumely. This culture of support lies at the heart of the Royal Literary Fund one-to-one system.

## **2: Granting the Student a Voice**

One of the student respondents draws attention to the fact that, besides enabling individuals to cultivate writing style, Royal Literary Fund one-to-ones give 'a chance to those people who don't normally speak in group environments'. This community of the shyly silent exists within the university as a submerged majority. In the worst cases, it often means that the more timid members of seminars never articulate an opinion or put a question and therefore never feel bonded to the academic body. Yet there is no correlation between timidity and lack of intelligence. This problem may be aggravated at universities where the student community is divided between ex-public school and state school students: the latter feel at a disadvantage both intellectually and socially.

In what sense can and does the Royal Literary Fund scheme 'give the student a voice'? The very fact that he or she comes to the Fellow with an intention to speak about problems means that the silence is broken. One respondent confesses, 'In group sessions I very rarely have the confidence to say anything, especially as I am not good at verbalizing my thoughts and lack confidence in my opinions'. S/he goes on to say that one-to-ones have permitted the articulation of problems which had seemed inexpressible. I doubt whether it can be shown that the Royal Literary Fund scheme gives students a voice outside the Fellow's office where other factors continue to prevail but the simple fact of permission to discuss difficulties in an atmosphere free from judgment is enough to make students feel that they have a voice and that it has been heard. One Fellow suggests that the private sessions not only help 'quiet/shy' students to 'expand and open up' but also limit 'Confident/big talkers' in a useful way, confining them to a listening and learning posture.

Another student writes, 'When meeting someone that I see as academic and intellectual there is a fear that I will be found out to be a 'fraud' or trying too hard to

be clever, that sort of thing. This fear was quickly dispelled.’ This very lively and intelligent student used a cluster of words that one often encounters in the responses, when she expressed the fear of detection as a ‘fraud’ and insisted that the sessions were ‘Welcoming, non-threatening’. That the air of the Academy should be felt to be thick with the sense of threat should give us pause: the importance of grades and the tendency of modularization to intensify the scramble for high marks makes the modern university a site of competition. A Fellow notes that students benefit ‘most from having their metaphorical hands held’. However, all Fellows emphasize that a ‘matey relationship’ is not desirable. The value of private space and the supportiveness of the Fellow within it is felt as encouraging to those for whom such competition is painful.

### **3: Focused Personal Attention**

‘Fellow is an apt title,’ writes one user of the scheme. ‘I was received as an equal, on a friendly human level.’ ‘I was made to feel like an equal,’ says another. A Fellow reinforces this by insisting, ‘I treat [students] as equals (which they are of course).’ This two-way exchange may be called the soul of the Royal Literary Fund scheme and the above student’s experience reflects a commonly expressed sense that, within the relationship of mentor and mentee, there is one shared and exclusive aim: to discover the particular problems of the individual and to solve them together. The ethos of the meeting is not a *de haut en bas* talking-down from a superior to an inferior but the putting together of two heads to discover ways of dealing with problems. The meeting takes place on the human level as well as on the pedagogic level or, rather, the pedagogic element is rooted in and depends on the human meeting. Respondents replied that the apprehensive awe which preceded the first visit to a ‘real’ writer, an ‘expert’, soon evaporated when it was discovered that the Fellow met students with interest and in a spirit of equality: ‘Considering [her] experience and expertise I still felt very comfortable, never intimidated. She never told me what to do, she may only suggest something and if I disputed this she would accept it because respecting my opinion too.’ The confession of comparable flaws and experiences by the Fellow may also relax tensions and the same respondent commented that it ‘made you feel even profession [sic] writers suffer the same problems as students’. Another student remembers her Fellow ‘talking about how she writes and her particular problems’. And a Writing Fellow notes that ‘I often say that I have problems with

commas or colons myself, that this is quite normal but you can work out what you are meant to do with them.’ The terms in which she phrases her response to their anxiety echoes the actual words, plain and simple, she would use to the student. Fundamentally, this is a levelling and egalitarian idiom which, somewhat exaggerating the symmetry between mentor and mentee in relation to punctuation difficulties, offers a hand-up by someone who knows by experience the difficult climb and its negotiation.

Such an exchange is felt by the student to be especially valuable in an academic culture where lecturing staff are called upon to play the role of omniscient expert. Acknowledgment of one’s own failings and struggles is something that is easier for the Fellow to do, since s/he is not subject to appraisal. The autonomy of the Fellow has great value.

#### **4: The Nature of the Welcome**

‘The session usually starts with a brief personal exchange,’ writes one student, who goes on to say, ‘[The Fellow] never seems fed up’. Of course, Fellows may be as fed up as the academic in the office next door by the end of a long day spent toiling with apostrophes and the logic of paragraphing. But the professional posture of the Fellow is also a personal one. Some Fellows welcome the student in a version of the guest-host relationship, with hot chocolate and an easy chair to sit in, but whether or not such comforting symbols of hospitality are offered, all Fellows present personal warmth and receptivity at the threshold of the experience. One Fellow has placed all the IT equipment out of sight from the angle of the door; her room has carpets, a comfortable chair and a picture on the wall, to make visitors at ease. In some universities there is a premium on space and the Fellow may have no more than an adequate office. This need make no difference at all to the student’s sense of welcome and indeed there may be some gain in presenting the Fellow as a professional, on a level with the academic staff.

Fellows themselves express a range of views about the ‘hospitality’ aspect of the session and most dismiss ‘fussing over coffee’ as eating into the serious business of the meeting. While some have spacious studies, others are confined to pokier and more utilitarian offices. One works in ‘a pleasant, well-appointed room ... with a view over the College garden ... table and chairs ... armchairs for more relaxed talking’. Another has ‘a comfy chair for the student, and a big window with a good view’. But

another insists that the Fellow ‘adapt to the space’. Where the accommodation is less than opulent, it can be made to ‘feel good’, in an atmosphere which is not dependent on furniture. However, size does matter. Where Fellow and student are crammed into a small space, ‘using our knees and getting rather physically close’, the conditions of trust and ease are jeopardized. The student needs both closeness and distance in order to avoid problems of undue intimacy which will be addressed later. Fellows are exceedingly alert to this danger. One notes that his office ‘feels business-like rather than homely, and I’ve tried to keep it that way because I’d prefer my work with the students to be more technical than supportive.’

One student writes that her Fellow ‘knew my name which was nice’. Few comments more aptly conjure the anonymity of the conveyor-belt atmosphere of some modern universities. It seems so little to ask and it is the bottom line of a genuine teaching relationship. The sense that the Fellow ‘enjoyed having me there’, as one student put it and that ‘I didn’t feel like I was boring’, as another phrased it, endorses the Royal Literary Fund philosophy of convincing the student that s/he matters. We all know how it feels to encounter the forbidding or daunting atmosphere of a professional office when we go there cap in hand: the lawyer, doctor or dentist who greets us with weary formality is less effective than someone who initiates the meeting with a welcoming smile and a friendly word. The Royal Literary Fund scheme can offer this immediate sense of welcome and relaxation since the Fellows are there for no other purpose than to help students overcome their problems. This relationship of trust and cordiality is set up from the crucial first moments of the exchange. A student reflects that s/he was ‘unsure beforehand if I was a time waster etc – but as soon as I entered room [sic] was made to feel at ease’. This phrase, *as soon as I entered the room* is illuminating. The most common words used by the students to describe this welcome and the atmosphere in the room are ‘informal’, ‘friendly’, ‘intimate’, ‘relaxed’ and ‘warm’ but these are often balanced by words like ‘professional’ and ‘detached’: false intimacy and an affectation of close friendship are foreign to the Fellowship ethos.

## **5: What is the Problem?**

Students occasionally arrive in the Fellow’s office in a distraught and inarticulate state. Fellows may be confronted by a tearful person who has received punishing criticism of his or her writing which, though not so intended, has been experienced as

‘rubbishing’. In such cases, a gentle, tactful and commonsensical response is called for and the Fellow, whilst enquiring into the source of the anxiety in a reassuring way, will at once seek to calm the student and at the same time consider his or her suitability for the scheme. It often becomes clear that the Counselling Officer, the Dyslexia Unit or the English for Non-Native Speakers Department are the appropriate places for students whose troubles have deep-rooted causes that we are not trained to address.

Fellows often comment on the desperate condition in which non-native or unhappy students display. One, who has counselling experience, notes, ‘I don’t think it [a therapeutic role] an appropriate role for us past a “First Aid on the spot” reaction’. What comes out of the Fellows’ responses is a sense of how acute and widespread are the problems for non-native speakers in universities which are turning to overseas students for economic reasons. In many institutions there is insufficient provision for such students. It is emphatically not the role of the Royal Literary Fund Writing Fellows to address these elementary problems. One Fellow reports ‘a whole string of Chinese MA students in urgent need of major remedial English study’ for whom he has been unable to find help on campus: ‘How did I tackle these things? Badly, I think. But I’m learning.’ This very humane response says much for the ability of Fellows to shoulder difficult tasks in a modest and adaptable manner.

Some cases of student distress however may only be superficially extreme. The problem often lies in a student’s complete inability to fathom the meaning of the tutor’s comments on her essay, occasionally indeed to read them. If it is difficult to articulate these, the Fellow asks to see the work that has been criticized and together mentor and mentee puzzle out what the major problems seem to be. By studying the papers together and sorting out the nature and root of the problem, attention is diverted from the embarrassed student, releasing eye contact and allowing the chance for recovery. The same diversionary effect may be achieved when the mentor notes the student’s name and details on the Royal Literary Fund form. There is a calm pause which enables the student to recover ‘face’, while the Fellow’s eyes are occupied with the prosaic task of taking notes.

The immediate attention the Fellow can give to apparently small issues of punctuation, syntax, format, will often help the student to realize that improvement is readily possible. For instance, a single glance at the page tells the writer if paragraphing is either excessively fragmentary on the one hand or non-existent on the

other. To pass across this simple piece of information is to offer a fragment of hope and an indication of help to come.

## **6: Small is Beautiful**

Writers work daily in the medium of language and understand the large effects of small changes, the importance of the minutiae of diction, punctuation and word order. Such understanding, together with a fascinated sense of the malleability of language, is vital to their own work and their work with students. Academic colleagues sometimes ask the Fellow, ‘How can you bear to do such menial work?’ The question is astounding to the Fellow whose profession involves the most delicate and intricate adjustments of minimal linguistic signs.

This intense writerly focus gives the exchange with the student its vital focus and an assurance to the student that the discussion is genuinely interesting to both parties. One high-flying (but modest) student writes, ‘I have really felt the emotion and passion behind what I thought were the most banal parts of writing; the importance of grammar, of really understanding the words you are using.’ Another writes, ‘Good writing can involve a good deal of “fine-tuning” so that it appears to be “effortlessly perfect”.’ It is this ‘fine-tuning’ at which writers excel: their close editing of their own work sensitizes them to nuance and inflection in language. Hence, writers do not see themselves as performing elementary work when they address problems stigmatized by some academic staff as ‘remedial’ although they may indeed be compensating for gaps in the educational system.

One student records that ‘Grammar has improved, due to simple explanation’. The mysteries of the semi-colon and the colon are subjects upon which every writer has mused during composition and at editing stage. Hence he or she is perfectly placed to enter into discussion of the function of these minutiae with a genuine (and perhaps surprising) considered passion, addressing simple problems with clarifying effect. The curious effect of all this is that the student does not feel talked down to when addressing apparently elementary issues. Instead, the equality of the relationship is reinforced and the ‘eureka’ effect can be reached over the placement of a comma or the removal of a parenthesis.

As one student writes, ‘Sometime, [the Fellow] would write a small change to show me how simple it was to alter a paragraph, and then I could follow by this example.’ Another says, ‘The sessions teach you what you cannot pick up from reading text

books etc. Even the smallest pieces of advice (e.g. not using capital letters) is obvious but makes a huge difference.’ Another recalls that her Fellow ‘taught me how to use the semi-colon properly. As soon as I had mastered this, I was able to cut down the word length of my essay (one of my problems) on my own.’

One forthright Fellow records her practice of emphasizing ‘that like car mechanics, all faults can be fixed with a bit of advice and technique ... [there is] no rocket science about academic writing’. This breezy dismissal of the arcane mysteries of academic expository writing, which loom so large in the minds of students, is both salient and salutary. The nature of the lexis in academic textbooks, together with the lofty register and the theoretical abstraction, is often hair-raisingly impenetrable to the student who resorts to a kind of hopeless, helpless pastiche, often deviating on the one hand into gibberish and on the other into plagiarism.

Plagiarism is a worldwide problem in all academic institutions: there is a growth industry in essays for sale on the Internet and significant numbers of panicked students resort to this expedient, less out of criminality than a kind of cynical and despairing innocence. They cannot supply the goods the system demands of them: the things they are taught seem meaningless - so perhaps, in a consumer education system where the preferred synonym for ‘student’ is ‘customer’, they can pay for them? Plagiarism is easy to detect through search engines. The student found stealing material is punished severely.

I myself, an ex-academic, am not ashamed to say that I frequently find myself utterly lost and confounded by the obscurities of postmodern theoretical discourse. Under such circumstances, I feel a fool and a failure. This gives me a built-in advantage in meeting a bewildered student in his or her fog: it is my fog too. But of course, as a writer and an intellectual, I have the experience to confront it. I possess an accumulated wisdom that can be transmitted together with the knowledge that large problems can be taken apart into a number of small problems and clarified by simplification. A Writing Fellow can demonstrate in simple terms that an essay is not in fact ‘rocket science’; that the first duty of a writer is clarity and sense; that much of the problem can be solved with the linguistic spanner and screwdriver.

Another Fellow speaks of moving in the course of a session from the ‘biggest problem in the work’ brought to her to going ‘through the piece together, looking at the nuts and bolts’. In the imagery chosen by each of these Fellows we see a process of demystification going on. The message is that students can be guided to recognize

problems as mundane and manageable. Another Fellow counsels that with ‘very weak students’, rather than depress herself and the student by attempting (and failing) to address the magnitude of the problem, ‘I’m now ... focusing only on three or four specific problems ... for each essay’. Here we see the application of practical commonsense to an intransigent problem, so that it becomes capable, not of solution, but of amelioration. Both Fellow and student benefit.

Remaining steadfastly outside the academic framework seems to many Fellows vital. One reports that ‘being a bit ignorant’ of the academy ‘is a big advantage for me ... I simply ... explain what a question or passage means in plain English. Fellows’ modest but adamant commitment to ‘plain English’ helps the student to feel that problems can be solved.

### **7: The Listening Spirit**

What are the distinctive qualities that we can expect a writer to bring to bear on the one-to-one exchange? Many students speak of ‘empathy’. They say that they have felt ‘listened to’. One student identifies the quality brought by her Fellow in this way: ‘X is very good at empathizing, and she definately [sic] knows what it’s like to be in our situation. There are many, I’m sure, who have lost all memory of what being a student is like, and they don’t really help when you go for advice ... she gets interested in things you’re interested in’. This report incorporates a practical definition of ‘empathy’: putting yourself in the student’s shoes and refusing to surrender to the easy amnesia of (for some of us) middle age.

This listening spirit is surely germane to most kinds of writing, whether poetry, fiction or drama. Art is not simply self-expressive. Fiction incorporates multiple characterizations, dialogue and a polyphony of voices; drama is nothing but voices; and poetry involves closely listening attentiveness to the timbre, rhythm, cadence of the speaking voice. If the writer is (as I believe) more likely than not to be an empathist, this should equip her or him uniquely for the carefully listening role that allows another person to feel ‘heard’.

Here, of course, we must exercise care: we cannot claim that writers have any monopoly on sensitivity or a listening ear. But there is no doubt that the habitual elasticity of the writer’s imagination, his or her necessary openness to the variety of human nature combined with verbal attunement, have the potential to enhance the writer’s capacity to enter into the student’s experience. The report quoted above ends

by saying that ‘she gets interested in things you’re interested in’. This extends the concept of empathy by pointing to the way an open mind will take fire from another. As writers, we work a great deal by the vicarious spirit of the imagination. Several Fellows emphasize the fascinations for themselves of being initiated into subjects (‘What is snow?’ ‘What is the relation of albumen to yolk?’ ‘What causes phantom pain?’ ‘What motivated Napoleon?’) of which they have no prior knowledge. Where ignorance is perceived as curiosity, it is accurately identified with bliss.

### **8: The Boundaries of Empathy**

One can imagine dangers arising from an empathic exchange: they are those identified by psychologists as ‘transference’ and counter-transference’ and they are pitfalls latent in all close teaching relationships, especially one-to-ones. They involve trespassing into ‘therapeutic’ territory; undue intimacy; inappropriate confidences by the student concerning their lecturers. And to move too far towards friendship, for instance, inviting students home and treating them as personal friends, would be to risk transgression of the necessary boundaries, creating a plethora of problems. One Fellow admits to being ‘quite a soft and obliging sort of person’ who initially, with mature students, ‘formed friendships outside the office’ and gave students a home number. Recognizing the danger of this in opening the Fellow to exploitation by blurring the personal and professional roles, s/he pulled back. The word that surfaces most frequently in Fellows’ responses is professional’. All insist on ‘boundaries’ and ‘barriers’ as a professional necessity. As one Fellow says, ‘Reading this over, I sound very cold and dentist-like! But there can be a relaxed friendly atmosphere in a strictly professional setting. I think better to be formal and bend a little than be a big cuddly friend.’ This is an exemplary statement of the balance Fellow must maintain.

It is central to the Royal Literary Fund ethos that all students be treated and valued equally and with a respect that incorporates a measure of distance. Royal Literary Fund Fellows are not there as therapists but as professional writers. This aim creates a space that is at once personal and disinterested, impartial and focused. While it sometimes happens that a student’s personal problems become apparent as a root of the problem, both parties are steadfastly intent on improving a student’s writing understanding and skills.

We have to hold our borders and boundaries. Students who have been given low grades will be all too happy to censure their lecturers if given a chance: that is human

nature. However, Fellows are adept at finding ways of heading off such inappropriate topics. They would not last five minutes in their institutions if they indulged such fruitless and impertinent criticism. One student pithily and trenchantly advises, ‘Keep it short and not too frequent and then this “danger” [of ‘undue intimacy’ or ‘therapy’] could be kept at bay. Any vulnerable student could latch on to a sympathetic ear, but the forum is to better ons [sic] writing ...’.

The very structure of the session militates against an inappropriate intimacy. ‘We would discuss my general work situation, move in to pin down problems, talk about resolutions and then set up a follow up meeting,’ a mentee remembers. Both the structure within the individual meeting and the time-limit on the meeting (a half-hour or hour that can seem all too short) unite to create an environment in which time cannot be wasted. Many students want more time, more often: the fact that, as schemes develop, time and available slots in the timetable become exponentially shorter, only reinforces the importance of focusing, during the time available, on writing issues.

Another student writes that, ‘There was very much a sense of letting me talk as we mulled over problems; as if she wanted to hear me out so as to find the root of problems, or the interesting parts of issues, etc. There was obviously some sense that she was leading me, because I was learning technical facts and techniques, but it was more like *guidance*.’ This is a valuable summary of what the Fellow can offer in terms of a session that is not in any obvious way mechanically structured but which achieves structure from within. This quotation shows how a listening and permissive intelligence, taking account of the student’s expression, can focus down in dialogue to ‘the root of problems’ and crucial aspects of thinking, writing and reading issues. Hence, the student seems to lead improvisationally and the mentor seems to follow. At the same time, the mentor guides and the student receives information on ‘technical facts and techniques’. The exchange is defined as reciprocally active and passive, with minimal coercive force being exerted. This is a procedure which, while it seems to open out the dialogue, in fact focuses it in to a succinct form which isolates and addresses the student’s precise needs.

However, Fellows do not take the possibility of undue dependence and intimacy lightly. There is an awareness that students in the one-to-one situation ‘may think they are getting personal attention for their own sake, and thereby embark on student-tutor fantasy’. I confess that I have not been immune to the temptation to see ‘my’ students’

improved grades as somehow ‘my’ grades too, and I have heard other Fellows make similar observations. From this consciousness arises the strict tone of many Fellows when they stress professionalism, whilst allowing for the possibility that ‘therapy is a side-effect—more confidence, control, etc’, as well as the caveat expressed in one thoughtful Fellow’s remarks that ‘there is inevitably an element of therapy in its broadest sense in the relationship’. S/he goes on, however, to observe with jesting seriousness that ‘I’m far too old for there to be a problem with undue intimacy’. Several others echo one Fellow’s insistence that s/he is not ‘a particularly cosy person to be with’: they emphasize the offering of focused insight and dispassionate, impartial advice. When Fellows notice the ‘complex and subtle’ dynamic shifting as students ‘dump their emotional problems on the Fellow or lean too heavily’, they take early steps to obviate the problem.

### **8: The Shape of the Meeting**

What happens behind the closed doors of the Fellow’s room? The primary focus is often on technicalities and, after the first session, the mechanics of the meeting are generally provided by the preparation and discussion of a new piece of student writing. Hence, informality is predicated on formalities and there is no sense of ‘dropping in for a chat’ because most Fellows are pretty fully booked. One student describes the structure as determined in advance, ‘with the pre-reading of a nearly complete essay, via e-mail. The session was then based around the Fellow’s corrections, suggestions for restructuring, and general advice about tone and expression.’ The Fellow concluded the session ‘With advice about how to proceed with writing procedure in the short term and long term’. The conclusion of a session is often more of an art than its initiation, and Fellows are aware of the need to avoid bundling the student out of the door with the task half-completed. They may shuffle papers together, announce that the session is near its end, shift their chairs, move back slightly, fold their hands—the usual social hints that indicate a conclusion. Occasionally more strenuous efforts have to be made such as gesturing to the door or opening it as with one Fellow’s alcoholic visitor or students who are compulsively garrulous. Gentle hints are normally taken or the next mentee knocks. Recapitulation and restatement of the task for the next meeting is a formal way of bringing a tutorial to its close. But however the ending is signalled, the time that is shared must be remembered by the mentee as a time that another student writer describes as ‘all my own’.

The structure as perceived by the student, therefore, is rather a dynamic than a mechanical one with a sense of reciprocity so that the Fellow is not seen as controlling the exchange with an iron hand. In answer to the query as to whether the Fellow ‘led’ or ‘followed’ her session, one student responds, ‘Sometimes I would be asked questions to open up different angles, at others, I gave my perspective then [the Fellow] gave me suggestions. Or, we spoke mutually.’ The concept of ‘speaking mutually’ is surely the ideal to which all Fellows aim. It represents the willing relinquishing of the kind of power-relations that are often possible in a teaching situation, in favour of a fluid movement between the postures of leading and following. This corresponds with the theme of ‘*guidance*’ described by another student and with a Fellow’s remark that ‘I bounce off the things they say and the queries they raise.’

Other students call attention to the structure of ‘question and answer’ as determining the shape of the meeting. When a postgraduate was considering the working of a PhD proposal, the meeting ‘took the shape of a question and answers session, with the clear goal of revealing my interests/intentions for research’. This dialectical formulation brings to the fore the Fellowship’s aim to elicit, educe, draw out the intention or meaning of the mentee, often at the same time coaxing forth appropriate words, rather than imposing any prejudice or intention of one’s own. Fellows are enabled to do this by their twin primary duties to keep faith with the needs of the individual student and to make available the apt discourse.

## **9: Humour**

Communication within these structures can take a variety of forms. Although seriousness without solemnity is the appropriate norm, humour can be crucial not only to the pleasure of the learning relationship but also to its efficacy. Fellows have no gospel to preach and no theories to proselytize. One student says that humour ‘makes the sessions more relaxed. It was quite funny once when we were looking for a poem on the Internet & a really loud piece of classical music came on—I don’t think I would have laughed as much if I’d been with a lecturer.’ This personal ease with the Fellow has significance beyond the matey. Everyone likes to be liked and Fellows are no exception. The student’s memory of bursting out laughing (which would have severely embarrassed her in a more formal situation) does not imply disrespect but personal trust. Another student astutely describes the role of humour in this way:

‘Useful helps you see that essays are not the be all and end all [sic]’. This is a lesson many of those conscientious souls who are stressed beyond what is healthy for them need to learn. Writers, who enter the university from outside its walls and return whence they came, belong to a world which frames the academy and, in an important way, cuts it down to size. While it is true that we are not counsellors, it is also true that Fellows can implicitly remind their mentees that there is a world out there, to which nothing could be less relevant than the writing of an academic essay. Fellows bring in to the institution their independence of it.

The breaking of the serious discipline of the mentoring session with laughter and amusement is not only a welcome refreshment for both parties but a way of breaking down barriers so that positive criticism can be put in a humanly acceptable light: ‘Humour from my Lauraisms!’ writes a Laura. ‘Lapses in my writing ability regularly create humour.’ This, of course, is humour between friendly people who understand each other, within the boundaries of the tutorial relationship. The Fellowships have no place for sarcasm or mockery. Another student records that humour is ‘Very important! Humour prevented the sessions from becoming too serious or stressful: a reminder that writing should be pleasurable.’ All Writing Fellows report that humour is an essential aspect of their tuition, often explicitly placing it above ‘chat’, which is digressive. That this kinship between pleasure and writing should so often go missing is the measure of the need for the Royal Literary Fund scheme in higher education.

Humour, which breaks down barriers between person and person, can also be a uniquely useful pedagogic tool in teaching writing: parody and mimicry of a discourse can take a nervous student to an awareness of the desired register and tone. Other Fellows tell me that they also use a sprinkling of parody to engender a relaxed acquaintance with modes of discourse which the student is called upon to emulate. We are mimetic animals and we learn discourses as we learn languages, by imitation. When the Fellow adds in the spice of wit, learning can be the joy it ought to be. For some students, this light-heartedness does not significantly help and that one student reports that humour is ‘not major, because I’m usually stressed’ and another feels that ‘there will always be that “sarah ghost” standing beside me’ but that the help the Fellow could give could dislodge her in the here and now.

A mature student sums up the variable role of humour: ‘For me, I find humour a fantastic way of alleviating embarrassing situations (for me one might be my lack of formal education, now slightly redeemed by the degree). Having a sense of humour

about this, and general human follies, makes it less painful. Yet for someone else this might not be the case.'

### **10: Confidence and Independence**

Every student who uses the service seriously reports an increase in confidence, while every Fellow without exception perceives growth in confidence (often a very slow, incremental, organic process) as the fruit of their work. Some students need far fewer sessions than others to achieve this sense: just one session may be enough to clarify a specific issue. For others, the experience is a process which leads gradually to a point at which the need for the Fellow subsides. 'The meetings,' writes one student, 'built up my confidence and made me feel much better about approaching my writing tasks (assignments). Overall [sic], the effect was to raise my standard and grades.' During the complex and tightly-woven exchanges which move progressively over time in weekly or fortnightly sessions, into a familiar relationship, both the Fellow and the student assess the point at which the process should be brought to a conclusion. The whole process is seen, from the beginning, as bounded and finite. This is necessary for two reasons: the need to avoid dependency, and pressure on the system from new students.

One obvious indicator that the student can cut free from the Fellow is the point at which grades improve. For both mentor and mentee, there is unique satisfaction when the student puts her or his head round the door and reports improved marks. In the majority of cases grades improve, often dramatically and almost always substantially occasionally sensationally, as in the law student whose abysmal 23% and 29% gave way to 74% and 71%. This highly intelligent student, who had been resistant to the system's exclusion of her personal and somewhat radical and inappropriately passionate view of the legal issues and cases she was required to assess, grasped a means to incorporate them as judgments in the style and argot required. The miracle transformation of fail to first class marks was achieved by the combination of the Fellow's ventriloquistic abilities as a writer and the student's active struggle to turn her originality to good account.

However important grades may be as a motivating factor in bringing the student to the Fellow, they are secondary to the activity which goes on in the Fellow's room. Another student makes this distinction pertinently: 'I found that getting marks back from tutors did not always explain in enough detail why one essay was 60% and the

other 70%. When [the Fellow] read the essays, she was not looking to grade, but improve the essay. This meant that she was able to point out where bits were muddled or contradictory, show me how it can be altered. It was this process of actually showing and explaining how my writing could be improved that was very useful.’ Hence, the Fellow leaves grades to take care of themselves: what lies at issue is the writing and its quality. Sometimes valuable and important work can be done by putting a sample text on-screen and having the student make changes, cut and paste, restructure, with the mouse passing to and fro between the two. Or both parties will jot down notes. One Fellow makes considerable use of sketches and diagrams, which the student executes under her supervision, to plan the task in hand. This use of graphic representation cuts the task visually down to size: the whole plan can be viewed as a single structure. At other times the Fellow will explain a point of grammar or logic. At a certain point, however, these joint efforts will reach their natural conclusion: put simply, they will begin to bore the student. The fledgling takes flight.

Does the one-to-one system ever become too attractive? Does it beget dependency? One student respondent writes that ‘At first it is easy to become too dependent but the student has to break away and begin to learn and write on their own—taking away and using the lessons their Fellow has taught them. My Fellow made me independent by setting me tasks to do, i.e. write a first/rough draft away from her watchful eye until she became a reference point to come back to rather than a lifesource!’ Touchingly, she ends her questionnaire, ‘My fellow is responsible for my recent success at university and I shall never forget the contribution she has made to my confidence and my quality of life. I don’t think I’m stupid anymore!’ However much the Fellow would like to flatter herself that she has indeed changed the mentee’s life, she cannot legitimately do so. For the statement is not accurate: no Fellow can be responsible for the success of a mentee. As another student writes, ‘You are doing the work, she is not doing it for you’. Those students who use the service in a positive and active way reap the rewards for themselves.

There is a leaven of students described by one Fellow as ‘passive, sitting back and watching while you edit their work’. Such passive vessels are loath to leave, for they are very comfortable where they are; yet they do not really learn how to improve or, indeed, learn anything at all. Fellows are alert to the importance of the student’s responsibility for her or his own writing. A minority of students blame the Fellow for

their own inability to progress: this parasitical attitude often accompanies and is symptomatic of problems of personal instability which Fellows cannot and should not have to deal with. In general the exigencies of the timetable will close the ever-open door to people impervious to learning. In other instances, Fellows need to explain to the student that they have now offered all possible help. We learn, too, from our own mistakes. I now regret the time I spent mentoring a prolix and domineering mature student, an ex-teacher who wished to learn by the unpromising method of ‘teaching’ me the erroneous futility of my suggestions. I allowed these hectoring digressions to command too much attention for too long. Such forbearance might have been permissible had this individual been able to garner anything from me despite the handicap her compulsions put on the learning experience. She did not. Royal Literary Fund Fellows do not have time or energy to waste.

Such a case is an exception. It is crucial that students feel empowered and independent of the Fellow. Independence from the Fellow is, indeed, the aim of the venture, which culminates in students’ release, having had certain issues clarified, into the enjoyment of their own achievements. The few students who come with the lazy idea of getting the Fellow to correct their essays for them are soon dissuaded by the amount of co-operative work a Fellow expects of them. Some drift away, never to be seen again; others return just before the deadlines for essays, again to drift away.

### **11: Good Idea**

‘I didn’t know that you’re here as part of a big organization thing. I think it’s such a good idea,’ concludes one student. ‘The “big organization thing” is such an imaginative concept ..’. The realization that the individual Fellow belongs to a network of writers located in many centres of higher education is a source of wonder to this student, who had benefited from the scheme chiefly by receiving some praise for a change, rather than suffering what seemed to her the cryptic censoriousness of those appointed to judge her writing. The student goes on, ‘she’s given me more praise than I’ve had for about 3 years.’ Three years corresponded with the time she had spent at university.

‘Praise where praise is due’ is a watchword of the scheme. However, one Writing Fellow reminds us thought-provokingly that one must ‘always find something to praise’, even in the weakest students, ‘even if unjustified, as they must have hope’. This is a crucial insight. It brings to mind the wisdom of Coleridge’s ‘Work without

hope draws nectar in a sieve,/ And hope without an object cannot live.’ Fellows see so many students who are almost abjectly conscientious because they are lacking in hope. Fellows can offer more than crumbs of hope to the least able students—and hence the possibility of thriving. As long as such undue praise is offered in moderation and without implying that the work is objectively better than it is, such an offer of ‘hope’ is always justified. One student records, ‘Although I still didn’t definitively grasp essay structure I came away feeling positive and good about myself. I think it was when the Fellow said “you write well, but ...” nobody had said that I wrote well before, and the “but” after was good, positive help. It was a great confidence boost.’ It is sad to think that the academic system is perceived by students as so miserly with praise, for praise, honestly and judiciously apportioned, is a formidable pedagogic tool. In acknowledging the qualities and potentialities of the student, it yields encouragement to progress and achieve one’s very best.

The ‘good idea’ of the Royal Literary Fund Fellowship Scheme lies in its ability to empower and encourage in a genuinely democratic way. In an academic world which has increased student numbers at an unprecedented rate, without simultaneous expansion of staff numbers, the discrepancies in the system—between students from impoverished backgrounds and those from privileged homes and schools; and between elite and non-elite universities—have magnified. This disparity is to a marked degree alleviated by the scheme’s ability to address the individual’s problems. As one thoughtful student puts it, ‘It was an invaluable experience and a rare one to be able to learn from a distinguished author in person, face-to-face. The “human contact” aspect of this scheme is where all the encouragement comes from and is vital to its success, given that access to a literary mentor is usually reserved for privileged or high-flying students.’

## **APPENDIX: QUESTIONNAIRES**

### **STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE**

#### **Stevie Davies: ROYAL LITERARY FUND QUESTIONNAIRE: THE WRITING FELLOW'S WORK AT THE UNIVERSITY**

During the coming year, I shall be working on a Project for the RLF on the value of the one-to-one sessions which the Writing Fellow conducts with students, especially the role of the meeting on the human level, in helping students with writing problems. If you could spare time to answer the following queries (as many, or as few, as you wish), it will be helpful to me. Do be honest, as it will not prejudice my position in any way. Feel free to answer by email attachment or on paper.

I acknowledge that I am not an expert in creating questionnaires! The following queries are just there to trigger memories & thoughts, & I shall be just as happy if you jot these down informally, rather than feeling obliged to fill in each 'box'. By the way, if you can remember particular incidents or moments that seemed to make a difference, those will be especially apposite. So I have started with two large, baggy questions.

#### **LARGE BAGGY QUESTIONS**

1. What, in your opinion, are the benefits of the one-to-one RLF sessions, as opposed to group sessions?
2. What do you feel you have taken away from your contact with the RLF Fellow, in terms of learning about good writing, and how far has the human contact contributed to this?

#### **THE NATURE OF THE EXCHANGE**

1. How were you received by the Fellow, in personal terms?
2. How was your half-hour or hour structured? (Was it structured at all?)

3. Did you feel adequately listened to, as you explained problems & issues?
4. Did the Fellow seem to be enjoying the meeting and does that make a difference?
5. Did you benefit from the confidentiality of the relationship?
6. What was the effect of the meeting(s) on your confidence and peace of mind?
7. When discussing problems with the Fellow, did you feel supported or judged?
8. Did the fact that the Fellow is not part of the assessment process make the relationship easier?
9. What, if any, means did the Fellow use to put you at your ease and to reassure you?
10. Is there a sense of equality/equivalence in the relationship, and did you ever feel talked down to?
11. Did the Fellow 'lead' or 'follow'? (i.e. was she attempting to show you the right path or eliciting what you wanted to say? – or both?)
12. Do you notice any mirroring in the exchange? (for instance, if you expressed a problem, did the Fellow ever recall her experience of similar problems?)
13. What is the role of humour in the relationship?
14. Are there dangers that the relationship might deviate into undue intimacy on the one hand or 'therapy' on the other?
15. When the half hour, or hour, was up, how did the Fellow signal this?

16. Would it be possible to become too dependent on the Fellow or does she attempt to make you independent of her? If so, how and how successfully?
  
17. One year on, do you imagine you will carry with you/ have you experienced any gain from the relationship, and, if so, what?
  
18. ANYTHING ELSE YOU CAN THINK OF!

## FELLOWS' QUESTIONNAIRE

Dear Fellow or ex-Fellow,

Steve has kindly allowed me to circulate this questionnaire to give me information for my Project about the variety of practice and experience in one-to-one sessions. Please do not feel pressured to answer all the questions: anything you can tell me will be greatly appreciated, and the more specific and concrete, the better. I am interested in the relationship of the personal to the pedagogic in RLF practice. So no information that contributes to the larger picture will be too banal or humble.

Many thanks – ever, Stevie Davies

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## LARGE BAGGY QUESTIONS

1. What, in your opinion, are the benefits of the one-to-one RLF sessions, as opposed to group sessions?
2. Are there any drawbacks or dangers?

## THE NATURE OF THE EXCHANGE

1. Does the nature of the space affect the meeting with students? Do you work in an office atmosphere or do you have comfortable chairs, offer coffee, etc? Do these things matter or make a difference?
2. How do you structure your sessions?
3. What means do you use to put students at their ease and to reassure them? Is there a role for humour, chat, etc?
4. Do you feel students benefit from the confidentiality of the relationship and from the fact that the Fellow is not part of the assessment process?

5. What seems to be the effect of the meeting(s) on students' confidence and peace of mind? How can one tell?
6. Are there dangers that the relationship might deviate into undue intimacy on the one hand or 'therapy' on the other?
7. When the half hour, or hour, is up, how do you signal this?
8. Would it be possible for the student to become too dependent on the Fellow and how do you ensure that they become independent of you?
9. I imagine that we have all had one or two bad experiences in one-to-ones. Would you mind letting me know any of yours (in strictest confidence) and how you tackled it?