

What's Going On With Student Writing?

A study commissioned by The Royal Literary Fund

by

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Introduction

The idea behind the Royal Literary Fund Fellowship Scheme is to take a professional writer of literature, any kind of writer – biographer, poet, novelist, dramatist, children's author, script-writer, literary translator – and fund her or him* to work for two days a week in a university, helping students improve their essay writing skills. Public education will thereby benefit from having tutors on hand to help students write better, and writers will have the security of a year's funding.

The scheme differs from other writer-in-residencies in that the RLF Fellow is funded to help all sorts of students with *academic* (not creative) writing: undergraduates, postgraduates, scientists, arts students, fashion students. Students can consult the RLF Fellow on any written assignments – essay-writing, personal statements, letters, dissertations, proposals, job applications – and most of the teaching is done through one-to-one tutorials. There are no rules except that the student volunteers to see the Fellow, and the Fellow is not roped in to take part in the academic teaching or marking load of the university. His/her status as a writer is sacred and crucial.

The scheme has now been running for 5 years with up to 55 writers at a time working in different universities, and the feeling most commonly expressed by these writers is surprise.

First there is the wonder of having a year's guaranteed income and how that enhances the writer's self-esteem and sense of well-being. Then there is the discovery that many writers (not all) find their own creativity benefits in other ways. Time is divided between personal writing and talking about academic writing with students which seems to both focus and refresh the mind of even the most seasoned author. This unexpected pay-off for the writer is part of the inspiration behind my study. Being engaged with writing, any kind of writing, in itself stimulates fresh approaches. 'If you

* From henceforth the pronoun for writers and students will be 'she' or 'her'. Most students who come for help to the RLF are female.

spend time thinking about your unconscious processes, you do become very much more aware and can put the skills acquired from there into practical use' (*Shahrukh Husain*).

But the biggest surprise of all, and one felt by all the Fellows, is how much students need help, how grateful they are for unhurried personal attention and how far the skills of the creative writer dovetail with the needs of students engaged in academic writing.

So in this study I will look first of all at the skills needed for competent academic writing and explain why it is that a lyric poet or a screen-writer with no relevant academic qualifications can help a student of physics or literature to write essays.

I'll then give an overview of the experience of RLF Fellows in universities, the kind of help students need, and why they need it.

I'll then look at the experience of professional writers, academics and successful students, to see if there are common ingredients in their background and education which have enabled them to become competent and confident writers.

Finally, the study will explore the link between what's happening in schools and the demands of academic writing at university level, and ask some key questions which may suggest a way forward.

Chapter 1:
The Writing Skills that Students Need at University Level

... to write an effective academic assignment include:

- The ability to spell, to construct a sentence, to punctuate rationally and to divide writing into logical paragraphs.
- Competence in word-processing, cut and paste, formatting, page-numbering and foot-noting.
- The ability to assimilate and organise information.
- The confidence to read widely, fast and with focus.
- A grasp of the subject under discussion.
- The confidence to select and discard material.
- The ability to make and organise useful notes.
- An understanding of the particular style and format required by their chosen discipline.
- An understanding of how to compile a bibliography, and to reference their sources.
- An understanding of what plagiarism is, and how to avoid it.
- An understanding of how to interpret and read a question or title so that they can respond to it with confidence.
- A facility with language, so that they can give expression to complex ideas.
- An ability to plan.
- The ability to develop an argument, so that the essay flows smoothly from one idea to the next because there is an underpinning logic.
- The courage to face a blank page (screen).

- The confidence to search for help from the tutor, other students, the library and the Internet.
- The courage to re-write or start again as necessary, to extract the good from the over-written or irrelevant, to restructure and on some occasions rethink completely.
- An understanding that writing is a creative process that in itself develops ideas and often produces more than the writer imagines possible at the start.
- The ability to think laterally and make connections.
- The ability to edit, re-draft and proof-read.
- The qualities of self-motivation and patience.
- The qualities of self-discipline and time-management, to give time for analysing the question, reading and note-taking, first, second and third drafts, proof-reading.
- The ability to be receptive to verbal and written feedback, so that they can build on strengths and weaknesses identified in previous work.
- The ability to work for long-term aims, with little immediate reward.

So it's clear that good academic writing requires a host of skills, some technical, others creative, emotional or intuitive. And it's also clear, from a glance at the above list, why creative writers find that they can help students. Most of these skills apply to all kinds of writing, not just academic. An historical novelist can help a computer scientist – and a poet a geographer or fashion student – because the experience of writing in all disciplines and genres is similar.

Shahrukh Husain puts it like this: 'Structure is an area where a writer can help very substantially because of a highly developed instinct for juxtaposing information most effectively. There are areas where I advise instinctually and then detach a moment and work out why I've done that, or why it works, and that's the bit I explain to the student. I believe that as writers we are as well-equipped to teach effective writing as,

traditionally, a mum is equipped to teach domestic chores and cooking – from sound experience and know-how gathered both from books and trial and error.’

The professional writer has other, underlying and hard-won skills that can be a help to the student. Most writers have faced the horror of writer’s block at one time or another, and the temptation of displacement activities. All have endured disappointment and professional setbacks. Re-drafting is second nature to them, as is playing with ideas and experimenting with style. They are used to working to deadlines and meeting the demands of their trade. They have learned that language is flexible and finding exactly the right word is important. And above all they know that writing has little value if it doesn’t communicate clearly what the writer wants to say.

There are also less obvious reasons why RLF Fellows can be of value to students. In the first place they are outsiders. On the whole they are made welcome by the institution, but they are crucially not part of the assessment process. Students can therefore admit to inadequacies and fears much more freely. Sally Cline puts a further, different slant on this outsider role: ‘I believe that a Fellow’s freedom to encourage free thinking amongst undergraduates and postgraduates is as important to the workings of an academic institution as it is to the literary life in the UK.’

Fellows also have the luxury of time. From the age of four most students will have been taught in large groups, and will rarely have had more than a few minutes’ personal attention from a professional (except in the doctor or dentist’s surgery.) An RLF Fellow is able to offer an hour at a time of personal attention, and the opportunity to return for follow-up sessions. The therapeutic value of this personal attention is probably one of the greatest benefits of the scheme for students. ‘To my mind, the most important qualities for the Fellow to bring... are listening attentiveness, kindness, respect and humour’ (*Stevie Davies*).

Then there is the creative writer as role model. A student attending a tutorial with an RLF Fellow is likely to find her in the middle of re-drafting an article or reading a book. She is obviously immersed in writing of some sort or another and is hugely sympathetic to the demands and intricacies of the written form.

Finally, a writer has come to trust her instincts. The chances are she thinks laterally and creatively, and has the confidence to explore issues beyond the remit of a

seemingly narrow task. She knows that when faced with a writing task, she will be able to complete it. She is not afraid of the process of writing. She is addicted to writing, even though she knows all the pain involved, because she understands that writing taps into a part of the consciousness that otherwise lies dormant, and through writing, insights, connections and discoveries can be made that would never have been apparent at the planning stage of a piece of work.

One poet (Rupert Loydell) spoke of the fact that he had developed over the years from the romantic idea of waiting for inspiration from the poetic muse, to planning and processing meticulously in advance of an anthology. In this, he says, there's no difference between academic or creative writing. They are both ways of writing about something that has enthused the writer, and a writer's job is to use language to facilitate an expression of what is meant.

Before going any further I want to establish that an underpinning theme of this study is that all effective writing to some extent depends on creativity. The dictionary definition of creative is: 'able to create; inventive; imaginative; showing imagination as well as routine skills'.* This element of creativity is not necessary, perhaps, for a dull, third-class essay but when it comes to exploring and connecting ideas in a good essay, it is crucial. The point of most writing assignments is not to reproduce ideas, or even just to put them in some sort of order and link them up: it is to make connections, to take a line, to argue, to show understanding of a number of points of view and – in an ideal world – to draw original conclusions.

The first coherent piece of writing a child will come across is a story, and even the most simple story, let's say a story about a blue engine, has structure. It has a beginning a middle and an end. The engine sets out from its shed, gets involved in an adventure, returns home. This, very simply, is structure, and one understood clearly by a 3-year-old. Even on this level, the intellectual and the creative are not independent of each other. The structure enables the unexpected turn of events in the engine's routine to take on a coherent form. It's a revelation of the work the RLF has been doing that

* This is *The Concise Oxford*. A more elaborate definition in the *Reader's Digest Oxford* includes words like originitive, artistic, original, ingenious and resourceful.

creative writers are able to help academic writers because the two types of writing are deeply related.

Here's Helen Lamb on the subject: 'Words don't flow effortlessly from the end of my pen. I've been working at the nuts and bolts craft for years and still don't find it easy. So I have sympathy with students struggling to express themselves on the page. Writing requires a lot of patience. It may be the one virtue almost all writers have in common and it's definitely an asset in this job...

'Apart from the tone, I'm not sure that there really is such a great difference between academic and creative writing. In both cases, what matters is focus, structure, clarity, the precision and smooth flow of language. In my day-to-day work with students, I find myself constantly applying the practical knowledge I've built up over the years.'

And another important point to establish is that, without doubt, some people have an affinity with writing – and some don't. In this, writing is no different to other activities, such as sport, understanding machines, numbers or nature. This study doesn't seek to argue the sociological or psychological reasons but the fact is that to some students writing comes easily and to others it doesn't. On this point Shahruxh Husain comments: 'There is that certain something which I am convinced cannot be learned though, if it's there in the student, it can be brought to the surface, encouraged and nurtured.' And finally, Nigel Baldwin: 'But I know, even discussing stuff with members of staff who talk to me about their writing, that years of just being a writer carries with it one's own 'inner knowing' which is what you pass on – sometimes subliminally. It's a blessing to be able to do.'

Chapter 2: **The RLF Experience of the Need for Help with Academic Writing Skills**

RLF Fellows work in a wide variety of institutions – from the London College of Fashion to St Mary's College, Belfast; the University of Wales in Swansea to the University of Middlesex – but their experiences have such common threads that generalisations are possible. What follows doesn't apply to all students, but it does apply to students in all the universities in the scheme.

First, however, I should make clear that by no means every student decides to visit an RLF Fellow. The uptake varies but the maximum a Fellow might see in an academic year (2 days a week) is about 120 different students. Many, for any number of reasons, see considerably fewer. Most Fellows offer one-to-one tutorials, lasting up to an hour. (Some Fellows offer other kinds of help as well, such as 'writing skills' seminars and lectures, but the individual tutorial remains the most usual method). The students who sign up for tutorials are self-selective; they come in response to poster or email advertising, or because they've heard of its value through the grapevine or from a tutor.

It's perhaps worth outlining what happens in a typical tutorial, to give a clear idea of how an RLF Fellow works with a student. A few hours or days before the tutorial a student may drop in an essay already marked, or the draft of a new essay, though some Fellows are happy working on an essay which the student brings with her to the tutorial. The Fellow is able to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the essay by a rapid reading and by reference to tutor comment if it's there. The student then explains her reasons for coming and through questions, observation, direct comment, discussion and counselling the Fellow and student will address the issues raised by this particular piece of writing. At the end of the session another date might be arranged, or a clear plan for the way ahead, including a set of deadlines, agreed with the student.

Each Fellow will devise her own method of working and becomes expert at adapting to the needs of individual students. That is one of the joys of the scheme.

Here, for example, are three sample cases of my own work with history students at Hertfordshire University.

1. Mature student H. brings an essay about ways of reporting crime in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

H. has returned to full-time education after more than twenty years away from the classroom. She is able and dedicated but very insecure. She is now in her second year and the essay she brings is half-written. She has become bogged down in her material and is confused about the use of primary and secondary sources.

She has begun her essay with a lengthy account of crime during the period, its likely punishment and the unreliability of crime figures. Then she has started to write about ballads, giving all sorts of information about ballads in general but with no reference to crime.

I work with H. by structuring the tutorial as she might approach the planning of an essay and by asking a series of questions: ‘Why are you being asked *this* question about *this* period?’

‘What will be the argument of your essay (in about 25 words)?’

‘What are the key words of the title?’

‘Which primary sources will you use?’

‘What are the underlying issues here?’

We then focus on the ballad as one example of how crime was reported. We talk about how she will quote from a particular ballad and use the example to advance her argument. The conversation then moves on to secondary sources and their place in the argument.

Finally, she composes a draft plan in the form of a list of the key areas she would like to cover, how the argument will progress, and how she will introduce and conclude the essay.

2. Student R. brings an essay about the reasons for the successes and failures of different British colonies in America.

R. is a 19-year-old student who spends the first part of any tutorial telling me how stupid and slow she is, so some time is spent on reassurance and confidence-building. She is very conscientious and does a good deal of background reading (probably too much). She has written pages of narrative about the founding of her three chosen colonies but is worried that she's 'got the wrong end of the stick' and is way over her word-count.

I get her to teach me about the colonies, the differences between them, why she thinks one succeeded, another didn't. I ask lots of questions about the motivation of the founders, religion, economy etc. and hope this will encourage her to realise that she not only understands events and dates but also causes.

She puts in lots of qualifying remarks like: 'Yes, but I don't know how to put all this down...', 'It sounds so easy when you put it like that...', 'Now I don't know how to compare them...'

The second part of the tutorial is therefore spent helping her to organise her material, deciding how she is going to structure the essay. As with all students, I get her to reduce her argument to an abstract so she has a clear idea of what she wants to say. She leaves with a draft plan which will, we hope, enable her to analyse and compare rather than narrate.

3. Student P. arrives with a fistful of past essays. He wants to improve on his grades and asks for a few pointers as to where he's going wrong.

The comments by tutors on P.'s essays are clear and careful, and show a consistent list of mistakes. I ask him to identify the essay which bothers him most and we focus on that one. Then I start with the basics:

'Let's look at referencing. Shall we just check that you're clear about how to quote correctly and use footnotes?'

‘I see there are several punctuation errors. The apostrophe, for instance – shall we do a quick revision?’

‘You use single sentence paragraphs. That’s rarely a great idea...’

Gradually we go deeper into the essay: ‘Now, I’m wondering how you plan your essays. You jump rather suddenly from one idea to the next...’

‘Do you think about how you are going to link one part of your argument to another?’

‘You could make much more use of this excellent quote if you analysed it and explained how it is supporting your argument.’

I encourage him to come back with the first draft of a new essay so we can check how he is putting this learning into practice.

The above examples give some idea of the students’ motivation for visiting the Fellow. Here, categorised under somewhat sensational headings, are the main reasons why students need Fellows.

1. Desperation.

This is the student who is all at sea for one or more of the following reasons:

Some students have a very low level of basic writing skills. Universities are now taking students from a variety of routes and backgrounds. 18-year-old students can gain places with relatively low grades at GCSE and A level. Mature students with proven qualifications in other subjects or with relevant life/work experiences can enter via a letter of application and an essay, others through access courses.

Students with poor basic skills find that, although their grammar and spelling has been good enough to get them through school exams, they prove to be inadequate at university level. They have relied on the spell-checker which has dutifully spelt correctly the wrong word (compliment/complement, their/there, effect/affect). Their work is returned covered with corrections and they still don’t know when to begin a new paragraph or why what they’ve written is not a proper sentence.

One RLF Fellow comments: 'I was shocked that students had managed to gain access to university when their writing, grammar and reasoning skills were so seriously flawed' (*Magi Gibson*). Another writes scathingly that a mature student 'was the only one who can really write, since she was educated before English syntax was considered dispensable' (*Mary Flanagan*). It is certainly the case that during the 1970s and 1980s there was a great deal of flexibility in the school English syllabus, but that is not the case now. Children are taught to a very strict curriculum which includes the teaching of grammar and punctuation, however, these basic writing skills are as lacking in some 18-year-olds as in some 30-year-olds.

Some students have no understanding of the academic requirements of writing at university. An example is Mike, a retired manager, who has elected to study a history degree for his own pleasure and self-development. He gained access to the course through his qualifications in business and an introductory piece of writing set by the university. He loves history, has always read history books, and because of his age and interest in current affairs, is quite an expert on modern history. He writes his first essay with great gusto and is appalled by its low grade. The essay is full of anecdotes and opinions, and alludes to half-remembered books but references none of them. Furthermore, he is not used to not succeeding and is quite resistant to changing his way of thinking. In any case, he has no clear idea of why what he's written doesn't meet with academic approval.

Other students are so new to a particular subject or discipline that they are terrified of the assignment they've been set. An example of this is a philosophy student who can't understand the wording of the question, let alone the context. She is afraid of consulting her tutor for further help because she doesn't want to look a fool. A nursing student might be in similar difficulties. She will have acquired the basic qualifications needed to gain a place on the course, have excellent personal qualities and perform well in her practical nursing, but then find herself faced with a written assignment which requires her to process her practical work and show that she has applied the theory she has been taught.

Other students simply have no idea how to approach the writing of an essay. Such a student reads that the word-count is 2000 words and is caught like a rabbit in the

headlights. She has been used at school to writing structured responses to specific questions, to writing frames and practice-questions. The idea of extracting material, taking notes, planning and developing an argument seems frightening and impossible. She has the technical skills but not the confidence to organise, select, develop and argue.

And then there is the issue of self-belief. As one Fellow put it: ‘Many students believed they could not write, and that was the main thing that stopped them’ (*Vanessa Jones*). This lack of self-belief is key, and can be disabling. Even students who have proficient writing skills sometimes have a kind of intellectual timidity. They are afraid of thinking beyond the obvious for fear of getting their whole argument horribly wrong.

The most difficult student of all to help is one who has a combination of some or all of these difficulties but who cannot identify her own mistakes, let alone correct them. This could apply as much to understanding why a phrase simply doesn’t make sense, as to how to use quotation as a coherent part of an essay. Even when a Fellow or tutor points out that the wrong word has been used, this student is no better off because she still cannot see where the fault lies.

2. Frustration

This type of student is often relatively successful but is stuck in a certain grade boundary, or finds herself making the same mistakes over and over again.

Some students come with very specific needs. Someone might admit sheepishly that he’s never understood the semi-colon and would love to know how to use it properly. Another common need is to have paragraphing explained, or how to write a worthwhile introduction or conclusion. Others keep getting marked down for inadequate referencing, even though they have been supplied with a department handout that spells it all out. (What the handbook might not do is tell the student how to find the footnoting tool in Microsoft Word).

Then there are students who don’t have the technical skills because they have specialist needs. These include students with dyslexia or some other condition that prevents them writing fluently (even a stammer can inhibit writing), and others who find it difficult to write because English is a second language, and in some cases they are so new to the country that they struggle to articulate their ideas orally or in writing. The

conventions of writing in an English university are also alien to them. These students are often very able and may have highly developed writing skills in their first language.

Some students work hard but can't get their work above a certain grade. An example would be Cathy who writes laborious, well-referenced essays which lack flair or direction. She structures her essays to a careful formula, sets out what she plans to write in her introduction, presents both sides of her argument, and repeats what she's said in her conclusion. She lacks the confidence to adopt a more searching, exploratory approach although in the course of a discussion she will reveal a good grasp of her subject. This lack of confidence is quite endemic: 'Many students lacked confidence in their thinking, and so had little appetite for developing an argument. I found myself praising the joys of getting one's teeth into a question like a terrier and not letting go, and discoursing on Thinking as an Art Form' (*Alison Fell*).

3. Dedication

Most students in this category are quite successful and have the key skill of knowing where to look for help. Furthermore, if they hear of any new kind of help or stimulus they will seek it out, or will want to find out what they might gain from it even if they have no immediate needs.

Some of these dedicated students use the RLF Fellow as a sounding board for ideas, and as a means of self-development. They come to the tutorial because they want to discuss different choices of essay title, how they might improve on a high grade or to explore an argument. They are very competent already but they know that an excellent way of learning is to gain as many perspectives as possible.

Others are perfectionists and never satisfied. They like to talk things over with the RLF Fellow as one more way of working towards the best possible results. Some of the very ablest students ask for help from an RLF Fellow. These are the high-fliers who are trying to achieve a first-class degree. They are looking to find a voice, the extra flair that lifts their work above the pedestrian. They want 'sharp focus', 'greater discipline' (*Sally Cline*), a clearer style, a faster method of writing.

Others have very specific requirements and will go to every possible source for help. Caroline is a mature student who wanted to apply for a competitive postgraduate

MA in writing for the theatre. She had entered university on an access course having spent ten years since leaving school working as a mechanic. The degree had unlocked a passion for theatre and now she wanted to write a personal statement that would win her a place on the course. The RLF Fellow was just one source of advice and support in this process.

Chapter 3:
The RLF Fellows' Perception of Universities and their Response to Students
Needing Help with Academic Writing Skills

So it's clear that there's a variety of reasons why a significant minority of students need help with their writing. This section of the study will focus on why universities are accepting students with such basic needs and how they are responding to them.

I'll start by stating the obvious. A university course is designed to teach specific skills or disciplines at a higher education level. While an undergraduate course in geography or education develops students' knowledge and understanding of those subjects, it assumes students will have the basic skills needed to write the assignments which will test their knowledge. Time taken teaching writing skills is time taken away from studying the subject and the basic content of the degree will thereby be debased.

One of the most relevant (and alarming) examples of this is of students studying for a degree in education. One academic admitted that the 'skills base' of an education student can be extremely low, and will remain that way. They can get onto a B.Ed. course with a couple of A levels at which they have achieved C or D grades. They will need to have passed GCSE English and Maths with a C grade, or taken the equivalent government test. At the beginning of their degree course they may undergo a skills audit and be told where they might go to look up basic skills if they need to, but there are so many other things to be learnt that the student's own literacy and academic writing skills can't be addressed formally.

Furthermore, the pressure to train teachers is such that everything is done to encourage them to pass. Similar pressures are felt on other degrees. In a competitive higher education environment where students are aware how much their degrees cost, the pressure is on to retain and pass students at all costs. Unfortunately, universities are not always successful and drop-out rates can be as high as 30% .

The point is, then, that students attend university to study a subject. In order to gain access to their chosen course, they have to fulfil certain criteria. It is assumed, or hoped, that among these criteria, will be the ability to write competent assignments.

The change in student profile

Universities have changed radically in the last few decades. There are more of them, they offer a vast number of subjects, and most of them have become much more inclusive. Fifty years ago most undergraduates came from conventional public or grammar school backgrounds where they'd studied a specialist curriculum leading to A levels. Students these days are from widely different backgrounds, with different experiences of family, community and education. They gain access to university through other routes than A level, and inevitably therefore have different levels of conventional academic skills when they arrive.

Of course, the beauty of this is that students who would never have got to university before now have access to higher education. Mature students who have failed at school or simply not considered university are achieving good degrees in later life. They may well lack the conventional skills at the beginning of the course but are often highly motivated and able.

A typical story is a student, Y., who was brought up in a large family of older sisters where not much was expected of her academically and there was no tradition of reading or writing. She failed her eleven plus and from henceforth was left to her own devices by both family and school. She left at sixteen and joined the police, where she had to write reports but not much else. All her life she felt there was something missing and when circumstances allowed, applied for university. Her skills are latent and need a lot of work but she has the motivation and is hungry to learn.

And aside from this very broad student profile is the fact that modern students lead entirely different lives to their counterparts of even fifteen years ago. They no longer write letters or use phone boxes to communicate with home – instead they are

constantly linked by text and email. Money, or the lack of it, is a constant preoccupation and will inevitably affect their approach to student life. Many have jobs.

Universities also seek to attract a large proportion of foreign students. Such students are often highly motivated and are potential high-achievers. Furthermore, they may have skills at building an argument or writing at length not shared by their English counterparts. One Fellow writes of how: ‘All British students I saw had shockingly large gaps in the writing skills they’d been taught at school. Those from Canada and America were much more au fait with grammar, punctuation and academic style than their UK counterparts’ (*Vanessa Jones*). Another Fellow writes that Spanish, Italian and German students often had ‘no problem in constructing an argument; and were used both to writing much longer essays than the standard UK 1200-2000 word assignment and to using a more sophisticated level of discourse’ (*David Kennedy*).

However, these students sometimes struggle to write fluently in English and their understanding of the conventions of English academic writing can be poor at first. Such students need immediate and ongoing help.

Financial considerations

While one of the reasons for this change in student profile is ideological, the other is financial. Universities are short of cash and tend to be run as businesses as much as temples of academic achievement and ground-breaking research. This obviously affects students and their learning.

First there is the financial, as well as the ideological, need to attract mature and part-time students, and students who have not necessarily achieved high grades at A level, as well as students from abroad. But because finances are stretched, the needs of these students are inadequately provided for. So while the intake of students now includes those from a variety of backgrounds, often with English as a second language, universities are unable to afford adequate provision to meet their different academic writing skills. While some, but not all, universities do have writing skills’ programmes

even these are sometimes inadequate for the considerable and varied demands of their students.

Another issue related to cash restrictions is the need to create a viable staff to student ratio. The result of this is that the method of teaching in small groups, let alone the one-to-one tutorial, is now rare, outside Oxbridge. A student has little or no opportunity to develop a personal relationship with a tutor whose job it is to nurture her intellect. Personal tutorials – of the kind offered by RLF Fellows – are a unique opportunity to explore, to admit fears, to develop personal preferences, to receive direction, to listen and be listened to. And of course in some ways modern students, because of their varied backgrounds, need these tutorials more, not less, than their counterparts of thirty years ago.

Shortage of cash affects students as well as tutors. Many students are now working part-time to finance their degrees; some are trying to juggle almost full-time jobs or child-care with full-time degrees. Time spent at university and on assignments is piecemeal. Written assignments are often very rushed and done at the last minute (nothing new here, of course).

Changes in teaching methods

The decline in the personal tutorials as a teaching method has already been noted. Another significant change in teaching has been the advent of the modular degree. In this type of degree students are supervised by a number of different course leaders, either to study different topics, or in some cases different subjects or disciplines. The result of this is that they can find themselves under pressure to finish a number of assignments at the same time, and having to grasp the conventions of writing for a number of different disciplines.

Another side issue to do with modular degrees can be that learning is fragmented. For instance, a student might select a module on Ibsen as part of a literature degree and be faced with needing to know the background to the development of naturalistic theatre. She might have studied modules in Classical or Elizabethan theatre but have no

knowledge of the history of theatre in between. She is therefore faced with a significant and sudden gap in her knowledge. This study doesn't seek to comment at all on the value or otherwise of this type of degree – it is simply an observation of another hurdle the student has to overcome.

And there is one further, rather hidden element to modern teaching methods, not only at universities but in schools, and this was a point made most strongly by an academic involved in the training of teachers, and by English teachers. Much of the material used by students, including trainee teachers, is downloaded from the Internet or CD-ROM. A great deal of teaching now is done not through reference to books, but by hand-outs and downloads. Students are unaccustomed to using books for reference, to handling lengthy pieces of writing and seeing lengthy, coherent, well-constructed pieces of writing as models.

Universities and tradition

Coupled with all these changes is the somewhat paradoxical fact that universities, like other institutions, are steeped in tradition. This applies more to the older, red-brick institutions but to some extent also to the newest institutions, staffed by those who have themselves been successful students in the older tradition. Most degree courses are still assessed through written examination, the discursive essay, the seminar paper and the dissertation – although there might also be Intranet discussion, reports and video presentation. So the method of assessment is largely the same, even though methods of teaching, content of courses and profile of students have all changed radically.

Despite all this, there is undoubtedly unease in universities about the standards of student writing and the amount of help students are needing: 'There is increasing worry in most universities... about the amount and type of help which students can reasonably be given with their work...' (*Dr Jean Boase-Beier, University of East Anglia*).

Chapter 4: **How are Successful Writers Formed?**

This study has established so far that some students are arriving at university without the academic writing skills needed to perform well and that universities, for a variety of reasons, are often not able to answer those needs. The next stage of this study seeks to discover how these writing skills are acquired. Through the RLF, I had access to a pool of writers, academics and successful students, so it seemed logical to investigate whether there were common strands in their background and education that enabled them to become confident writers. I wanted to know why one person's idea of torture – filling a blank page with words – is another's joy.

To reach some sort of view on how people learn to write effectively, I posed a series of questions which encouraged writers to reflect on their formation as readers and writers, from earliest childhood to the time when they chose their career. Here are the findings:

Early childhood – pre-school

The most common feature of a writer's childhood is that there were books in the house when they were infants. 'I opened my eyes to books galore' (*Shahrukh Husain*). The content of these books varies enormously, from light adult fiction, reference books, Reader's Digests, encyclopaedias (a favourite of mine was a rather terrible old family medical book in which there was one particularly ghoulish picture of a girl with her night-dress on fire), and sometimes children's books.

It doesn't seem to matter what was in the books: what matters is that books were part of the furniture. One student writes of how her father, who had very little formal education, 'read all the time and always told us that if you read widely you could learn anything and go anywhere' (*Tracey Young*). So coupled with the presence of books was

the sight of adults reading something or other, the obvious message being that books and reading were an integral part of the early childhood world. ‘Many of my childhood memories used to revolve around watching (my mother) read, or us both reading together, in silence’ (*Kate Pullinger*).

The next common strand is that the child was read to: ‘My father sitting reading to me on my bed every night without fail... I used to follow each word with my little wormy finger while he read – from age 2 and 3’ (*Stevie Davies*). Picture books figure large in writers’ memories, and the joy of turning pages of Ladybird and nursery rhyme books to find the familiar illustrations.

If a writer wasn’t read to, she was told stories, and this is an interesting and significant common strand that extends to some peoples’ experience of primary school. ‘I come from a Welsh-Jamaican family, and reciting poems was a normal thing to do’ (*Catherine Johnson*). People remember the stories they were told when children, anecdotes of war, childhood and family, even if they weren’t told stories passed down in a great narrative tradition.

A further strand, perhaps even more surprising, is that almost everyone remembers being taken to the library, usually weekly. This library visit is highly significant and one repeated over and again, and I suspect that there is more to it than access to lots more books. When I think about my own expeditions to a small suburban library I remember a bright and well-organised world, relative freedom – I was left in the children’s section while my mother chose her own books – warmth, lots of colourful things to look at; familiarity coupled with discovery.

Then there is the common acknowledgment that some children definitely seem to be born with an affinity for books. Mario Petrucci is the one writer in my survey who had no books at all at home except a *Gideon Bible*. However, his neighbour lent him *Middleton’s Gardening Guide* which he learnt almost by heart. The implication is that it wasn’t the gardening but the book that so fascinated Mario, and most readers would sympathise with this – the fascination of print and pictures, and the familiarity of favourite pages. My own obsession was for Ladybird books on Florence Nightingale and Elizabeth I. The pictures and the texts seemed magical, familiar but mystical because of the access to whole other worlds. And Andrew Cowan, who had few books at home,

says he spent a lot of his childhood reading, ‘especially in the bath. It’s a mystery to me how this came about, but something clicked.’

Although people tend to be hazier about the process of learning to write, a common strand is that they liked the actual process of early writing for two reasons. The first was that they had a craving to write down and shape letters, to see the page filled with those mysterious marks, essentially to crack the code. ‘I’m told I was writing at around 2 and filled pages with letters from the alphabet saying they were stories...’ This is Shahrukh Husain who adds that her feelings about writing were: ‘Passion, bliss, escape but mostly slice of life. It was as normal, expected and encouraged as eating properly, taking exercise and practising good manners. And I couldn’t live without it.’

The second was that they became obsessed by features of the physical process of writing, the clean sheet of paper, the new pencil box, handling the pens. ‘Buying new school supplies in August was a very important part of getting ready to go back to school and inspired in me a stationery fetish that I nurture to this day’ (*Kate Pullinger*).

Primary school

What happened at primary school varies considerably when it comes to the nuts and bolts of forming letters and making words. Some people learnt by copying letters, others by being allowed to write masses of inaccurate words. Some had spelling tests and grammar lessons, others much less structured time. But there are two common threads.

The first is that most writers remember being given time at school to just write. In other words they were sent off to write stories of their own choice. These stories were often not marked except with a tick or a star, they were sometimes shared with other children, often not, but the memory of them is significant.

The second common thread is the remembered pleasure of being read to by the teacher. I went to a draconian and rigid primary school where we were beaten into submission and squeezed through the requirements of the eleven plus but even here, during needlework lessons, we were read to – Enid Blyton mostly, and I have never forgotten the sense of recreation and release. One student has a particularly touching

memory of being read to by a primary school teacher who was a ‘fantastic’ story-teller, and used to allow her pupils to take it in turns to comb out her hair as she read to them. As a result, he emulated her during rainy play-times by telling stories to other children.

Secondary school

It will be a comfort for struggling students to know that even the most proficient writers find the process a chore some of the time, and certainly did at school. Interestingly enough, the well-aided premise that there is a deep link between the learning of reading and the learning of writing is not always supported. As Roger Levy puts it, ‘reading was for enjoyment, writing was as far as I can remember, not.’

Writers are mixed in their views about whether formal grammar lessons were important to them – there is something of a consensus that the basic rules of grammar and punctuation can be ingested over time. So the formal teaching of grammar and spelling wasn’t necessarily significant, though people do remember comprehension (often quite a lot of it) and the art of précis, something largely forgotten, as being important to the study of reading rather than writing.

People remember having less freedom to write at length, creatively, at secondary school, though the old English language O level required creative writing and there were opportunities to write poems and stories. But what people do remember is writing copiously all the time, in every subject, from copying notes to writing discursive history essays. Only a few remember being taught formally how to structure an essay and break it into its component parts. To some people, including me, many of the rules of writing remained something you picked up, or were suddenly made aware of because a new teacher arrived with different, more rigorous standards.

A surprising number of writers identify the learning of a foreign language as being significant and often revelatory. Apart from anything else, it’s the learning of foreign languages that forces the learning of rules. Some mention Latin in particular as being a stepping stone to a facility with writing. One philosopher stressed how vital the learning of translation had been in his development as a writer, teaching him the need for

precision. Not only does learning another language throw into relief the rules of English, it encourages someone to think about language and enjoy the connections between words and meaning.

Learning a language does, of course, involve a lot of speaking out loud. One poet writes that learning to recite Keats and Hopkins by heart – discovering, as he puts it, ‘the physical power of the language’ – was very important to his emerging sense of words (*Roger Garfitt*). But he also notes that it was only while he was off sick at home, away from the constraints of school, that he could create as well as read poetry.

The quality of particular teachers is often stressed. An inspirational teacher at primary or secondary level can make all the difference – the right bit of encouragement at the right time. One writer remembers a particular, charismatic teacher ‘with his Leonard Cohen records and nicotine-stained beard...’ (*Stevie Davies*). And Helen Lamb writes: ‘Crombie Saunders made a big impression on me. He was a former journalist and respected poet. He wore a black polo neck instead of shirt, tie and gown. I’m not sure he was a good teacher in the conventional sense of preparing us for exams but he was passionate about poetry and introduced us to modern poets. He often talked about his work in progress and shared the highs and lows. He made the struggles sound romantic.’

Another salutary moment in the life of a writer comes from Andrew Cowan. ‘At A level we studied *A Portrait of an Artist* and our teacher encouraged us to attempt a self-portrait in words. I was the only one who bothered and I did it very seriously. It was 20 pages long and he wrote a 5 page response. This was a formative event really. I think that’s when I had the first inkling that I’d like to be a writer.’

Writing beyond school

Another feature of the lives of most competent writers is that they wrote voluntarily, at home, outside and after school.

‘I remember the days spent working at home when a few of my friends would be adopting a similarly slack attitude to work. We would send emails back and forth, bantering away and generally trying to sound like we wrote for *Q* magazine. There was a sense of freedom about it that meant you could write in whatever style appealed at the

moment, but an urgency about it that meant you had to churn out your thoughts very quickly. Those days of 50 plus emails certainly improved my writing' (*Craig Borlase*).

Other writers were usually busy scribbling outside school too: 'poems especially – once I got into women and beer...'

What inhibits the formation of a writer?

This section summarises the factors which writers say have inhibited the development of their writing, and the accounts of students who are now struggling to write, or mature students who left school at sixteen, believing that writing wasn't for them.

Expectations, or rather the lack of them, seem to be of great significance. A gifted mature student tells of how she changed schools at fifteen and, because there was no room for her in the O level English set, she was entered instead for CSE. Her mother was told that a grade one in CSE was equivalent to an O level anyway. Another mature student was put into a low ability English group because nobody could read his handwriting. The message learnt by these 15-year-olds was that they weren't good enough at writing to take the higher exam and this set them back (literally) for years in their academic careers, and in their confidence in themselves as writers. Teacher and parental expectations seem to be crucial. Ask too much and the embryonic writer is overburdened and angry, too little and the student becomes bored and lacking in confidence.

A writer who never had any experience of formal teaching of the rules of writing and punctuation writes of continuing insecurity: 'the constant sense of being a temporary debutante.' On the other hand, paradoxically, his major facilities: 'improvisation, narrative drive, eclecticism, flow from lack of formal introduction to writing and books.'

Another bad experience is being taught to conform to criteria without understanding why. One student writes that during GCSE and A level English lessons she was encouraged to re-draft a piece of work – or rather to hand in a piece of work that had corrections all over it. So long as there was evidence of editing, she received a higher mark. She therefore learnt to get through the re-drafting hoop, without the process

having any value or application and, as soon as she escaped school into university, stopped the process altogether.

School could be utterly repressive and squash creativity by not appreciating individuality – in one case putting the writer off books and writing entirely. ‘School beat confidence out of me. I think this is what schools do to lots of kids. They don’t realise that to write fiction or letters to mates or anything that isn’t an essay, colloquialism isn’t a problem. You don’t have to write an essay that reads like something out of a notebook. That’s cold and dead’ (*Catherine Johnson*).

One final observation: several writers and academics point out that the introduction of the computer into the life of a writer doesn’t always seem to make things easier. They argue that the word processor has endless possibilities for facilitating the editing process, and for the speed with which a piece can be re-drafted but it seems to have done nothing for the quality of writing produced. There are two possible reasons for this. The first is that there is perhaps something intrinsic to the process of writing longhand which is of value to the initial formation of ideas. The other is that it is fatal for a struggling writer to rely on the word processor for grammar and spell-check. Instead of learning and processing the rules themselves, students are relying on a machine, with sometimes disastrous results.

Case study

I’ll end this section with the story of a particular mature student and her progress as a writer. I have chosen a student rather than a professional writer because it’s significant that some of the elements that seem essential to the formation of a good writer apply to her as much as to the professional writers and academics I consulted.

Nicky is also the daughter of a policeman. When she was a child, her parents encouraged her to read a lot but didn’t push her to achieve. Her father used to make up stories for her about a fictional character called Mr Rusty. She remembers first learning to read by phonetic system which she has since decided was inefficient because although it enabled her to read, she then had to learn how to spell correctly.

The first writing experience she can remember is writing about books, something she always loved doing. She read a great deal and wrote lots of stories at primary schools. Afterwards she went to very liberal middle school where for several periods a week pupils could choose their own activities. She and her friends always chose to write endless stories about a particular group of characters and their adventures. She doesn't remember these stories being marked but they were read aloud within the group. She thinks there were formal writing sessions, which she didn't enjoy, when they were taught a bit about structure.

The downside of this approach to education was that she wasn't encouraged to tackle at any deep level subjects she didn't like. One particular memory was being called in to see the headteacher and asked to read a list of words to a visitor. The school obviously recognised her ability but did nothing with it. She says her aim at school was to keep her head down and stay out of anybody's notice.

Finally she attended a more conventional 'formal' comprehensive and sat O levels and CSEs. Here she was told at the end of Year 10 that she was probably in the wrong history group and given the option to try for O level but she chose to stay with CSE as she would have had a lot of catching up to do. She was 'double entered' for English and got A grades at O level. By now her parents had split up and she was writing a great deal at home as an escape from her unhappiness. These were her own stories which she hid and she was mortified when her stepmother found them under her mattress.

She did begin two A levels but dropped out due to peer pressure and the desire to earn money. Nobody encouraged her to stay on at school so she got a job in a bank, again keeping her head down, but read all the time without discrimination, all kinds of stories and books. She says her dream would have been to be a journalist but she would never have had the nerve to try.

Having children changed her and gave her confidence. When domestic circumstances were right, she did an access course in psychology and was told how to structure an essay. She found this easy and logical and applied to the university. Her working methods are those of an 'ideal' student. She not only reads widely but also chooses each essay question carefully and makes notes that respond to it specifically. She edits her work as she writes and is able to recognise things that should be changed.

Chapter 5: **The Teaching of Writing in Primary Schools**

Introduction

The National Literacy Strategy document *Developing Early Writing* (for children of rising five upwards) reads like a digest of an RLF tutorial in a university. It identifies the key features of good writing as being: ‘text cohesion, sentence construction and punctuation, word choice and modification.’ The writing process, it states, is one of decision making: ‘What am I writing about and who is it for?’¹

Key to the thinking behind the National Literacy Strategy is the example of 10- year-old Daniel who, during a conventional, pre National Literacy Strategy lesson, is being asked to write a story. The teacher begins by reading a story on a related subject, discussing ideas and building up vocabulary. Daniel is then encouraged to write his own story, asking the teacher for help when needed. Afterwards the teacher marks the story. The result of this strategy is that in Daniel’s book ‘after a term:

- Most of writing is narrative
- There is a high proportion of unfinished or poorly finished work
- The teacher’s corrections and comments seem to have had little effect
- His writing does not seem to have improved much.’²

This is because, according to the authors of the National Literacy Strategy, there is no intervention by the teacher at the *point of writing*. Interestingly enough, this is exactly how the RLF Fellow works with a student in higher education, *she intervenes at the point of writing*, a parallel which will be explored later.

The case of Daniel is the linchpin around which the National Literacy Strategy is built. The philosophy is that a pupil needs help as he writes, and therefore most primary school teaching of writing is now based on shared, planned or guided writing. Even

¹ *The National Literacy Strategy: Developing Early Writing* p. 9-11 (pub. DfEE, May 2001)

² *The National Literacy Strategy: Grammar for Writing* p.11 (pub. DfEE, September 2000)

independent writing is carefully structured, and strictly based on previously constructed outlines, lists of vocabulary, well-known stories and partially worked texts.

This section on teaching writing in primary schools is based on conversations with teachers and teacher trainers, visits to classrooms to see the National Literacy Strategy in action, and study of the National Literacy documents – and those produced by their critics. Through these various experiences of writing in primary school I will attempt to identify some of the implications of the National Literacy Strategy for standards of academic writing later in life.

Writing pre-school

Children's learning pre-school is changing radically all the time. There are many types of competing stimuli at home; television, computers and electronic games. A child is less likely to engage in creative play, reading and writing, simply because there are so many other ways of keeping herself amused. The behaviour modelled by adults and older children is also less likely to be related to reading, writing or story telling. At the same time, there is pressure to conquer basic skills very quickly, because parents are aware that the assessment culture will start to bite the instant the child arrives at school. Today's 5-year-olds are bound to be very different types of students in thirteen years' time, if only because of these factors.

Writing at primary school

The National Literacy Strategy, and testing at Key Stage 1 and 2 seek to *ensure* that every child is taught to write confidently and competently. This marks a considerable change from the somewhat haphazard teaching and learning styles that existed during the 1980s, and standards of literacy have certainly been raised (although there is concern that they reached a plateau in about 2000). Children are now taught from an early age the rules of punctuation and the parts of a sentence. They are given spelling rules and tested

frequently, and they know that different types of language in poems have different names. They are often good at reviewing books and recognising what they are about from covers and blurbs. The National Literacy Strategy has enabled children to look at texts coherently and to see how good writing is crafted and structured.

By the time they reach secondary school, most children will have experienced most kinds of writing. They will have written for a purpose – letters, poems, stories and reports. They will know what a powerful adjective sounds like and how to plan and re-draft their work. There is a good chance that even if the teaching is uncertain, the child will emerge with some of these skills because the material provided by the DfEE is comprehensive and tightly structured.

Here are some examples of primary school literacy lessons. In all of them, it is clear that the example of Daniel (as above) permeates each class and that shared and guided writing are key:

A class of 5 to 6-year-olds is engaged in writing about 'My Mummy' (for Mother's Day). The class had read a story about a polar bear³ and how his mum teaches him to swim. The teacher's own mother recently visited the school, and now the children help the teacher find adjectives that describe facts about her mother, as well as qualities. Having modelled a descriptive piece of writing about her own mother, the teacher then encourages the children to write about and draw their own parent. This piece of writing is done with great enthusiasm, in a bright and dynamic classroom environment.

In another class, 7-year-olds use a story about a child who helps the Mona Lisa escape her picture⁴ as a basis for their own writing. The classroom is full of posters and reproductions of other paintings which the children can also write about. They are encouraged to use thesauruses and lists of adjectives to find good descriptive words, and to plan their story carefully before they begin. They have 'frames' to encourage the idea

³ De Beer, Hans - *Little Polar Bear* (North South Books)

⁴ Mayhew, James - *Katie and the Mona Lisa* (Orchard Picture Books)

of stepping in and out of the picture. Afterwards a boy is dressed as the Mona Lisa and the class has huge fun putting ‘her’ in the hot-seat and plying her with questions.⁵

In another class of 6-year-olds children write little books entitled: ‘Through the Door’. The teacher has made each of them a booklet with ‘doors’ cut into the pages so that they can physically open the door to the next page. They have already planned the stories and written the beginning and middle. Now they have to write an ending.

For a quarter of an hour this class of about thirty children sits on the carpet and watches the teacher write the ending to her own story on an inter-active white board. Their concentration is astonishing. They wait patiently while she rubs words out and thinks aloud. They see the end of the story grow in front of their eyes, the process of getting things wrong and starting again, and of boldly making corrections. Later they all finish their own books with enthusiasm (and send them to me).⁶

A further class (9 to 10-year-olds) is based on a short poem full of similes entitled: ‘You’⁷. The lesson begins with a shouted exchange between two teachers which sounds like an argument but in fact turns out to be an enactment of the poem: ‘Your eyes are like....’ The children, having recovered from the joy of seeing teachers insult each other, are then encouraged to write their own poem on the same theme but using compliments not insults. Finally, amidst great excitement, they perform their poems to the class.⁸

In all these lessons, the children were given a great deal of stimulation and produced enthusiastic pieces of writing which had involved planning and use of effective vocabulary and punctuation. The tasks were relatively prescriptive but they produced writing that fulfilled its objectives. There seems little doubt that most of these children ought to be fairly competent in the rules of punctuation and spelling, will know about writing for a purpose and an audience, about planning and drafting, and about how to

⁵ examples available to the reader on request

⁶ examples available to the reader on request

⁷ Moses, Brian & Orme, David - *Poems Around the World 2* (Collins)

⁸ examples available to the reader on request

identify different components of a variety of texts – all of which seems to bode well for their ability later to write coherent academic essays.

The shadow-side to the literacy hour is – firstly – that it is extremely prescriptive and – secondly – that the encouragement of creativity is conspicuously lacking: in fact, as can be seen from the case of Daniel, creativity is specifically discouraged. Independent writing, unless firmly based on secure learning objectives, apparently has no purpose. The emphasis is on how to build and analyse texts, not on their creative content. Everything the children do is based on specific skills and targets so there is no time for free, creative writing. Some schools and teachers are relaxed enough to take the best from the National Literacy Strategy and then adapt it to their own purposes (one school I visited ran clubs on Friday afternoons which included drama and creative writing); probably most schools are too anxious and over-stretched to do much.

The reason why this is relevant should, I hope, be clear from the rest of this study. Good academic writing, like all writing, relies in part on understanding that writing is a revelatory process in itself. Writing can produce something more intuitive, exciting and coherent than the writer imagined possible at the start of the study. By writing, connections are made, means of expression found, subconscious preoccupations revealed, and all this is important to the ultimate aim of producing courageous, fluent, coherent writing. The freedom to write exploratory, free-ranging stories is gone, as is the sense of the children as producers of literature. It's as if in the desire to form accurate, effective writers the authors of the National Literacy Strategy have forgotten that the essence of a good piece of writing is that it has something original as well as necessary to communicate.

This omission is even more obvious in the way that stories and poems (always called *texts* in the National Literacy Strategy documents) are taught. Texts tend to be examined piecemeal, week by week, so that there's no sense of just embracing a novel whole, for sheer enjoyment. Aside from losing the pleasure of reading, the children's innate sense of overriding structure is lost. Pupils have no opportunity just to hear and enjoy texts without then dissecting them at length, writing notes on the author, exploring how the story was made, and maybe intervening in some way by writing a story based on

what they've read. Even more alarming is the comment by one teacher that parents are not encouraging their children to read freely at home – instead, they are making sure they go higher and higher up the reading schemes (written for purposes unrelated to good story-telling) in order to ensure they're hitting targets.

I'll leave it to Philip Pullman to state the case for the opposition: 'Proper writing ... does not always go through the process of planning, drafting, re-drafting, polishing and editing. Nor does every piece of writing have to be finished. There are no rules. Anything that's any good has to be discovered in the process of writing it. Furthermore there must be a willing suspension of certainty – Keats's negative capability – "the capability of remaining in doubts, hesitations and mysteries, without any irritable reaching after fact or reason" ...'

On the testing of writing he adds: 'It leads to a superficial way of working. I recently judged a short-story competition... All the entries bore the marks of having been drilled into the children: they were all empty, conventional and worthless... The things you can test are not actually the most important things.'⁹

There is of course a paradox here. Writing at university depends on students planning, drafting, discussing, re-drafting their work – the very skills that Pullman seems to vilify. Adult writers rely on this process to ensure that their ideas are communicated clearly to their readers. But there's no point in having any of these skills if there are no ideas to be expressed in the first place; a competent writer is secure enough to work skills and inspiration at the same time, by whatever method she chooses. But the springboard, the first phase of any piece of writing is, in the words of Anne Fine: 'that first, fine careless rapture.'¹⁰

And then there is the problem that all writing has to be assessed; another reason, perhaps, for educationalists to be wary of creative writing tasks. It's easy to mark spelling, less easy to quantify the amount of creativity. And, of course, the trouble with all criteria is that if they're not hit, the work is 'wrong'. To have a piece of creative writing marked down because it is poorly spelt is devastating for an embryonic writer.

⁹ Philip Pullman writing in *Meetings with the Minister: Five Children's Authors on the National Literacy Strategy* produced by the National Centre for Language and Literacy, 2003

¹⁰ Anne Fine in *Meetings with the Minister*

Every teacher who has ever taught a mixed-ability class (of whatever age) and given the pupils the opportunity to write what they like, will be able to predict the result. There will be children who cry in agony: 'I don't know what to write.' There will be the Daniels who write what they've written before, and often their stories will be about aliens, fights or football matches, or rambling accounts of days out or losing a cat; and there will be some children, a sizable percentage, who will fly, who will write and write, sometimes ordinary writing, sometimes dull, sometimes wonderful. This group would have included all the competent adult writers I interviewed – teachers, students, writers, academics. I think back to my own primary school days and imagine having to write to the criteria prescribed by the National Literacy Strategy. I think it would have given me early, valuable, structured insights into what constitutes accurate writing. I also think the lack of freedom to write at length, without constraints, would have been frustrating and stultifying.

Teacher training

The National Literacy Strategy has inevitably affected the way teachers are trained. Many primary school teachers will not be English specialists, and so the strategy is designed to ensure that these teachers have the materials they need to give children adequate teaching. Teacher trainers are expected to ensure that their students understand how to teach the National Curriculum. Students are not required to develop their own writing skills or see themselves as creative writers. Nor do they spend much time studying the various developmental stages of young children, or different theories about learning to write. They are encouraged to base their teaching of writing on:

D- irected

A- chievable

R- elated

T- asks.

During their training, students might, for example, have a lecture on the theory and practice of teaching spelling, then a seminar to explore the subject further. The training is purely vocational – to teach the skills needed in the classroom – not to shift students forward in any way. The ‘slanted’ thinking skills of lateral thought and creativity might be covered by a thinking skills programme.

The trainees are completely bound by QTTS (Quality to Teach Standards), and as long as a student reaches these targets, she will pass satisfactorily. Much emphasis is based on observation and on practice but there are a limited number of good schools for observations and there is very little modelling of lessons by teacher trainers.

Of course, good primary school teachers will branch out and use the literacy hour as a springboard. There is no doubt that the National Literacy Strategy provides a good, solid base-line which will ensure teachers and their pupils have a range of materials that will cover the skills thought necessary. But here, once again, is the crunch. The writing skills that are addressed are the skills that can be assessed. They do not include the bold, intuitive, searching skills of being alone and seeing what happens.

Conclusion

I’ll return briefly to the case of Daniel and the idea that the teacher should *intervene at the point of writing*. There is a crucial difference between intervening sometimes and intervening all the time. An RLF Fellow works with a student on her individual piece of writing. The pace and content of the tutorial is tailored to the student who then goes away and works independently, exploring, researching and completing on her own.

A teacher in a primary school classroom is working with up to thirty pupils at a time. What the National Literacy Hour misses out is the fact that all children need the tools to write well but they also need time, space and privacy to think and write independently, and not just about a shared topic or experience, but about their own, unique experience. Otherwise they will later have the tools but not the ideas; the structure but not the imagination, wit or courage to create a valuable and original piece of academic writing.

Chapter 6: **The Teaching of Writing in Secondary Schools**

Introduction

If anyone wants to pursue the arguments about how to educate minds and hearts in present day education, Alan Bennett's play, *The History Boys*¹¹, sets them out far more eloquently than this study ever could. One of its many themes is the conflict between educating for the sake of education, and educating for the sake of being assessed and hitting targets. One teacher is in the Mr Chips tradition of educating the whole boy, filling him with literature, opinions and arguments, while the new teacher in the school is intent on getting boys into Oxbridge by fixing them up with glib strategies. In this play, set in the 1980s, it is assumed that the boys at least have the basic writing skills needed to write down their ideas, however warped those ideas might be.

This last assumption is not the case with contemporary A level teachers who are well aware that many of their students destined for university do not have the skills to write well, despite having been through the National Curriculum, SATs (Standardised Assessment Tasks), AS levels and every other new initiative introduced into schools over the last decade or so. What most students do have (at A level) are sufficient skills to pass the exam, at some level or another, and the confidence that a couple of C or D passes will be adequate to admit them to some courses at some universities. So this study has now come full circle by reiterating that one of the reasons why students struggle to meet the standards required at university level is that universities are now admitting such a broad base of students. Whether the aim of enabling 50% of the population to attend university is a good or bad one is not at all within the remit of this study – it is simply stated as a fact.

Perhaps more worrying is the acknowledgement that even the most gifted A level students sometimes lack the independent thinking and writing skills which will be valued at university. RLF Fellows are used to meeting these kinds of students too. All in all,

¹¹ Royal National Theatre, 2004

there seems to be a mismatch between the aim to get a large percentage of 18-year-olds into universities and their lack of skills to cope with the courses there.

This section is based on visits to the English departments of two secondary schools, (one a grammar for boys, one a co-ed comprehensive), discussions with teachers, teacher trainers and a representative from the National Association of Teachers in English (NATE), my own experiences of teaching English in state secondary schools, and perusal of the National Literacy Framework, SATs, GCSE, AS level and A level papers.

The National Literacy Strategy

The teaching of writing at secondary school is governed by the National Literacy Framework, just as at primary school. The theory is that 11-year-olds bring to their secondary education a range of writing (and reading) skills that have been tried and tested (literally) at primary level, and upon which the teachers may build.

In his introduction, David Blunkett (then Secretary of State for Education and Employment) writes: ‘Language... is the key to developing in young people the capacity to think logically, creatively and imaginatively and to developing a deep understanding of literature and the wider culture.’¹²

Later the aims for students and their writing skills are clearly stated: ‘We expect each pupil to be... A confident writer, able to write for different purposes and audiences; able to write imaginatively, effectively and correctly; able to shape, express, experiment with and manipulate sentences; able to organise, develop, spell and punctuate writing accurately...’¹³

All the above seems highly appropriate to building the writing skills needed at university level. But a key element to the theme of the National Literacy Strategy at primary level is continued, and that is the avoidance of independent learning. ‘The Strategy is committed to supporting teachers to develop a range of effective teaching styles (direction, demonstration, modelling, scaffolding, explanation, questioning,

¹² *National Literacy Strategy, Keystage 3* p.5 (pub. DfEE, 2001)

¹³ *Ibid* p.10

exploration, investigation, discussion, reflection and evaluation).’ There is no time in the lesson for independent learning. Instead there is to be ‘use of the whole lesson for planned teaching, and less time spent on unplanned circulation around the groups...’ and ‘the use of shared time rather than independent time to ensure the transfer of skills into every-day use.’¹⁴

11-year-olds

Provision is made in the Strategy for a diversity of ability – the alarmingly called ‘gifted and talented’ – and those who have not achieved level four or above at primary school. However, a school taking a hundred and fifty 11-year-olds from twenty or more different primary schools is still dealing with an extraordinarily wide range of ability and attainment. Even among children who are supposed to have reached the same level, there are considerable differences. Some primary schools are expert at getting children to achieve high levels in SATs, and others are good at teaching children to write; – some, but, by no means all, are good at both.

Teachers of English in secondary school state that some children are still arriving without the most basic skills. For instance, they know all about what an adjective is but can’t necessarily apply that knowledge to their reading and writing. The suggestion is that, although these pupils have been successful in tests on that knowledge, they haven’t always ingested it.

For other children the National Literacy Strategy has worked well, and they do have writing skills that enable them to progress confidently to the next stage. But then there is a third group: the most able. One experienced English teacher stated that she could tell from a child’s ability at eleven if she was going to be a successful writer and excellent English student, and yet these able children still have to go through the same time-consuming and constraining hoops of testing at Keystage 3. In other words these children are held back by the National Literacy Strategy because there’s so much else they could be doing. So while on the one hand it’s recognised that the National Literacy

¹⁴ Ibid p.16-17

Strategy gives teachers a great deal of structure and material, and that it has led to very carefully planned teaching, on the other hand it is a constraint.

Another criticism of the National Literacy Strategy is that it is teaching by bullet point. Every lesson, in every subject, begins the same way: objectives go up on the board, there is an introduction, development and plenary. The element of surprise is totally lacking. And once again, literature is taught piecemeal. For instance, in the teaching of a wonderful novel such as *Skellig*¹⁵, the lesson might begin with a word-sentence activity (to do with spelling plurals), continue with the shared reading of Chapter 1, followed by a question and answer session and the extraction of words and phrases that present the boy's world, and finally a plenary drawing out the explicit from the implied.¹⁶ This breaking down of a text is of course what goes on throughout education, and has its place, but its effect, when applied to every activity, has implications for developing coherent and independent thinkers and writers – not to mention those who would like to gallop through the story, responding joyfully and intuitively to the writing. The effect on gifted teachers of literature can be confining. The effect on their students in schools likewise.

There are precious few opportunities for creative writing, except in odd pockets of time after the national exams are over at the end of the summer term and possibly in years 7 and 8 (the first two years of secondary school). The opportunities for students to become emotionally involved with a piece of writing, to just write, to experience the pleasure of moulding a piece of writing from nothing and the discipline of imposing a structure, simply don't exist.

Having said all that, there's little doubt that the key to encouraging good writing at any level is enthusiastic and well-motivated teachers who will model a love of both the written and the spoken word. There is no substitute for this and it was evident to me from the particular schools I visited that the pupils there would have plenty of opportunity to receive such teaching.

¹⁵ David Almond

¹⁶ *Framework for Teaching English: Years 7, 8 and 9* p.39 (pub. DfEE)

Assessment

The second most common criticism of the way learning is organised in secondary schools is that children are tested out of any pleasure in a subject, and this includes writing. The tests are all criteria based, and children at all levels have to meet these criteria or they don't do well. A teacher spoke of an A level student who had written the most extraordinary, searching answer on *Hamlet*, which may not get from the examiner the top marks it deserves because it doesn't meet the criteria demanded of the syllabus. This constraint is marked in all levels of the curriculum.

The cynical belief is that tests and examinations are made straightforward to teach and examine because teachers aren't trusted to have the ability required to teach more demanding, less structured syllabuses. In other words, SATs are designed as much for mixed-ability teachers as for mixed-ability students. One of the problems with this is that they are not an adequate preparation for GCSE – once again bright students are held back.

Here, for example, are the two questions on a Keystage 3 (SATs paper) about *Macbeth* (both compulsory):

'Question 1: In *Macbeth*, Banquo warns Macbeth about the witches' influence:

You give advice in a magazine for young people. You receive this request: *Please advise me... I have recently moved school and made some new friends. I like spending time with them, but my form tutor thinks my work is suffering. What should I do?*

Write your advice to be published in the magazine.

Question 2: (Two extracts are given from the play). Macbeth and Banquo are concerned about whom they can and cannot trust. How do these extracts explore the idea that it is difficult to know whom to trust? Support your ideas by referring to both of the extracts which are printed on the following pages.'¹⁷

¹⁷ *English Test, Key Stage 3, Levels 4 - 7 (2004)*

Two years later, at GCSE, a student might be asked: ‘What do you think the settings of time and place for *Macbeth* add to the play’s effects? You should refer closely to places, characters and atmosphere in your answer.’¹⁸

The GCSE question above requires many of the skills needed at A level and at undergraduate study: a profound knowledge of the play, an ability to interpret the question, the need to develop and support an argument by close reading and reference. Question 1 of the SATs paper is a piece of ‘writing for a purpose’ hung somewhat tenuously onto the study of *Macbeth*. The second question requires little more than cut and paste quotes attached to comments. Is the preparation for this kind of test a good use of students’ time, given the sophisticated writing skills required just two years later at GCSE?

However, the reason most often given for the dearth of independent writing and thinking is the introduction of the AS level examinations which are sat in the year between GCSE and A level (usually known as the lower sixth).

The AS levels were introduced to give students greater breadth, and it’s true that pupils are now studying four rather three subjects at the lower sixth. One teacher stated that she felt AS had led to more structured teaching in the sixth form, and this opinion ties in with another comment, that schools give less time to professional development on A level teaching, because the need to achieve well lower down the school is so critical to the school’s ratings. The introduction of AS level meant that departments had to focus on the quality of teaching at all levels.

The lower sixth used to be a year for exploring, for wider reading, for enjoying a subject, for developing skills. Instead, once more students spend time meeting criteria. They learn a subject for two terms and then spend a precious third term revising for state exams. A vital opportunity for developing writing skills is lost. Everyone I spoke to believes that there are much better things to be done with the time spent examining students in the first year of A level. (The AS level is likely to disappear under new arrangements for 14 to 19-year-olds currently under review).

¹⁸ *English Literature SEG 2003 Higher Tier Paper 6*

So one of the net results of all this examining is that students are just too busy to undertake independent learning, wider reading or creative writing¹⁹ and other activities. At every stage of their school life they are assessed, and every time they achieve a high grade the stakes become higher – more students are getting three As at A level so now an ambitious student must consider studying four A levels. And what's worse, they must achieve high grades not only for themselves but for the school, which will be judged and ranked according to results.

It's small wonder then, that school students tend to be passive, rather than independent, searching learners. They lack certain key skills of a good student – persistence, and the ability to seek a range of help. Because schools are so concerned with results, students, whether they have the capacity to learn independently or not, are fed the material they need to do well. This reflects the experience of the RLF Fellows in universities who find that students often lack the confidence to branch out and tackle an assignment in a searching and original way. They don't know how to take risks or think laterally. They are used to writing frames and scaffolds and, as a result, are frightened of creative tasks and longer pieces of writing.

General observations

A widely held perception seems to be that it is the demands of business that are dictating what happens at schools – or at least influencing policy makers – rather than the need to give pupils a good general education that will prepare them for the demands of higher education. This seems paradoxical, given the aim that half our school students should go on to university.

But a further fascinating observation was made about the expectation that 50% of A level students will go on to study for a degree; it has led to a lack of drive in certain students. Students who are likely to get the required qualifications at GCSE to stay on to the sixth form, and then go to university, will sometimes be content to do the minimum

¹⁹ For the definition of 'creative' activities I have relied on the report 'All our Futures' written by a group chaired by Professor Ken Robinson for the National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education, at the instigation of the DfEE in May 1999 – and largely now forgotten. Their definition of creative is 'imaginative, purposeful, original and of value'.

required to get by. They know that someone, somewhere, will take them on as an undergraduate. A student who realises she won't get the grades to stay on at school after GCSE, and will have to look for a course in college, or get a job, is often prepared to work extremely hard at the subjects she needs to qualify.

And nobody has cracked the problem of how to engage boys in the process of writing. The experience of RLF Fellows is that as few as 5% of students who apply for help are males. One teacher said she thought boys found it difficult to ask for help in a co-ed setting, and another teacher, in an all-boys, high-achieving school, said that while boys were happy to adapt to the demands of writing frames and were good at reaching the required criteria, they quickly became bored and critical.

In this same school I observed an English lesson in which Year 9 boys were asked to do a piece of creative writing. They looked at a series of photographs, then jotted down notes about what might be the story behind the photo, and finally wrote the story of the characters in the photos twenty years on. I didn't see the finished results but the boys accepted the task willingly and prepared to write with considerable enthusiasm.

Afterwards we had a brief discussion about their writing. One boy commented how, when he was given a writing task, he liked some structure but not too much; another that he loved being given the freedom to express his ideas but hated the drafting process; another acknowledged that going back to a piece of writing sometimes allowed him to develop insights he'd previously missed; and another boy spoke of the fear of the blank page and the difficulty of finding the right words. He knew if a word sounded wrong but not always how to discover the right one. It was an encouraging and fast moving discussion in which almost every area of concern aired by students writing at university level was touched on by 14-year-olds.

Conclusion

My investigations into writing at secondary school were hardly extensive and it is quite clear that, as everyone knows, there are a hundred conflicting pressures and tensions

within the secondary school curriculum. The reasons why 19-year-olds in their first year at university struggle with their written assignments are many and complex.

The National Literacy Strategy seems to be a mixed blessing. It provides teachers with clear targets and plenty of materials with which to help younger children learn to write. For struggling teachers in difficult schools it gives a framework; for more confident teachers it can act as a useful springboard; for those dealing with the most able children it may be a constraint, and there is always a danger that it becomes drudgery and cramps originality, wide reading, and extended pieces of writing. The lack of independent writing encouraged by the strategy has implications for the confidence of pupils at all levels and can mean that some struggle with the demands of GCSE and A level.

AS levels are a major constraint, impose great strain on teachers and pupils, and above all take up precious time which could be used to develop sophisticated writing and study skills (among other things.) Students are so frightened of failure that they would rather achieve good results than take risks. Similarly, the lack of creativity at all stages of the curriculum – and the downgrading of the importance of independent research and wide reading – seems to be affecting the competence and confidence of students. The culture of constant testing against easily assessed criteria and of a prescriptive and packed national curriculum may well have addressed certain deficiencies in teaching and learning. A large proportion of students do now leave school with well-developed writing skills but, at the same time, too many who have the skills to reach university are arriving there without the skills that are essential if they are to make the most of their studies.

Chapter 7: **The Way Forward**

As I stated at the beginning, this study was in part inspired by the surprise, shared by all RLF Fellows, that students are so in need of our help. The outcome of this study, I thought, would be relatively straightforward: that students were not being well enough prepared at school for what lies ahead. I knew that teachers were over-burdened with constant change in a service which for too long had suffered from under-funding. I knew too that excessive scrutiny by a negative inspectorate had resulted in the erosion of teacher confidence; and that working in a multi-ethnic, diverse society brought additional challenges. Finally, I knew that universities were also under-funded and struggled to cope with the needs of the very students they had strived to encourage and attract.

What has come clear during the writing of this study is that there are no simple answers. The formation of a writer is not straightforward and there will always be conflicts between the education of the most able and that of the most needy. The ideological arguments about what constitutes a good education for young people will and should be ongoing. What is clear is that the RLF scheme to fund writers to help students with their writing has brought the issue of students' academic writing standards out into the open.

So here are a few questions which will perhaps advance the discussion a little further:

1. Schools are constantly being faced with new initiatives aimed at improving standards. Pupils are subjected to national tests four times during their period at secondary school, but they are still often arriving at university without the skills needed for competent academic writing. What sort of dialogue is taking place between schools, universities and educationalists to ensure that one is a natural progression from the other, given that it is a stated government aim that 50% of 18-year-olds should go on to university?

2. A positive outcome of initiatives to widen access to higher education is that, those students who have not performed well at school or have chosen to defer their studies, are now encouraged to apply to university. The downside is that such students have very different needs to the traditional, academically-trained student. Although universities are developing various strategies including basic writing programmes and Internet help many students still struggle.

- a. How can universities really address the particular needs of modern students?
- b. Is the conventional means of assessment at university – through essays, dissertations and seminar papers still appropriate?

3. There is universal disquiet about the lack of creativity in schools due to the demands of the National Curriculum, AS level, constant testing and parental pressure. A review of 14-19 education is currently taking place which will almost certainly lead to the disappearance of AS level. The review is less likely to deal with the lack of creativity in schools. Given that creative and independent thought is key to the writing of effective academic assignments, how can this element be returned to an education system bound by the constraints of constant assessment to easily identified criteria?

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