

Writing Matters



The Royal Literary Fund

This group of essays is an extremely useful commentary on, and analysis of, students' writing abilities in higher education today. It brings together the accumulated wisdom of the RLF Fellows' experience and it makes a number of valuable recommendations.

Professor Philip Martin, Dean of Humanities, de Montfort University

I believe that this report, representing as it does a synoptic account of the views formed by RLF Fellows, is going to prove immensely valuable. Also, because it is written by writers, the whole document makes an extremely welcome change from the anaesthetic prose of too much educational development. I loved the blend of detail and wider argument.

Professor C.B. Knights, Director, English Subject Centre (Higher Education Academy)

Writing Matters describes with admirable clarity a situation that is well known to students themselves and those working with students but not yet sufficiently widely acknowledged at the level of institutional strategy in HEIs. The case is made very convincingly that the value to students, academic departments and graduate employers of addressing student writing skills would outstrip the costs. The report points clearly to writing skills being a developmental issue, not a remedial one. I think this is very helpful. Both students and academic departments have tended to see the problem as some kind of deficit. Students don't know how to address it without help and, as the problem has grown, academic departments have been reluctant to own it. Writing Matters focuses attention on the scale of the issue, the elephant in the dining room, but more importantly it advances practical suggestions about what might be done. The authors of the report are sensitive to the environmental changes which have contributed to the present condition of student writing and are conscious of the squeeze on resources within institutions. But right at the centre of Writing Matters is student need. The message is clear: in every sense, we fail our students when we don't act to address this. I will certainly be circulating this very useful report within my own institution and making it a focus of discussion in how we enhance the student learning experience.

Dr Judith Vincent, Acting Vice Principal, University of Paisley

The attachment of Royal Literary Fund Fellows to universities with the specific remit of helping students with their writing skills is an exciting and innovative venture which is already having positive results. Universities from all groupings and with differing missions have been involved as the problem of poor writing skills is not limited to any sector of higher education. This is an exciting scheme and it should be extended as far as possible... I commend its progress to date and wish it continued success.

Professor Nigel Palastanga, Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Learning and Teaching, Cardiff University

I found the report interesting and engaging. I was particularly impressed with the range of articles presented in the volume. The booklet makes the case for writing programmes in HE and I am sure that it will act as a great advocate for the work. It provides good case studies and examples which can be adapted in different circumstances and situates the work in the new world of HE that we are all now facing. I do think it will be useful to educational developers as well as new lecturers. I suspect it could also be used on training programmes for lecturers.

Professor Mary Stuart, Pro-Vice-Chancellor, University of Sussex

Writing Matters

The Royal Literary Fund Report on Student Writing in Higher Education

Co-edited by Stevie Davies, David Swinburne and Gweno Williams



The Royal Literary Fund

The Royal Literary Fund (RLF) commissioned this report as part of its programme of research and development in the field of student literacy, which it hopes will be of value to policy-makers in the higher education sector, university staff and writers working on UK campuses. The facts presented and views expressed in this report are, however, those of the authors and not necessarily those of the RLF, its trustees or employees.

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First published by the Royal Literary Fund, March 2006

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Typeset and designed by David Swinburne

Printed by abacus printing co ltd, Gloucester House, 34-38 Gloucester Way, London EC1R 0BN

An electronic version of this report is available from the RLF website,
www.rlf.org.uk/fellowshipscheme/research.cfm

For further information on the Fellowship Scheme or *Writing Matters* contact:

The Fellowship Officer
The Royal Literary Fund
3 Johnson's Court
London EC4A 3EA

Email – rlitfund@btconnect.com
Website – <http://www.rlf.org.uk>

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Preface

Writing Matters is intended as a call to action to the higher education sector in relation to levels of student writing competence and skills across all disciplines. This report communicates grave concerns about shortcomings in student writing skills nationally, and offers a wide range of creative suggestions and recommendations for ways forward. It is written with urgency and passion by a distinguished team of professional writers in a wide variety of genres who write with the authority of their own experience as Royal Literary Fund Fellows. They also represent the views and voices of the 130 published authors who have worked in the Fellowship Scheme in over 70 Higher Education Institutions across the United Kingdom since 1999.

Writing Matters constitutes an important prompt to higher education. The Introduction and the first two chapters offer both overview and details of a serious sector-wide situation. A further four chapters explore and outline a variety of possible solutions. The report is realistic in its analysis and recommendations, repeatedly acknowledging some of the key issues facing Higher Education Institutions, including widening participation, retention and graduate transferable skills. It should be read and acted upon by all who care about, or are influential in, the fields of student skills development and achievement, graduate success, and higher education policy.

Context

The Royal Literary Fund Fellowship Scheme is now in its seventh year of working with British universities. The scheme places professional writers in university departments to help students develop their essay writing skills, primarily by means of one-to-one tutorials. After the first five years of feedback from Fellows working with students on their writing, it became clear that there were certain themes common to Fellows' experiences in higher education. Not least, Fellows felt a sense of shock at a perceived deficit on the part of students in the skills necessary to write successfully at university level. In 1999, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) for the first time required Higher Education Institutions explicitly to articulate their goals for student learning by developing mandatory Learning and Teaching Strategies 'designed to... enhance the quality and delivery of learning and teaching, and to improve the educational experience of students across the whole institution' (HEFCE 99/48 p.7). Institutions were also encouraged to address the national key priority of 'ensuring that learning and teaching recognises the diverse needs of an institution's student population' (ibid. p.8). Yet, Fellows' contact with academic colleagues and writing professionals working in the sector heightened concern that those with the real power to affect change were not paying sufficient attention to the area of writing development.

RLF Fellows have a distinctive outlook for two reasons. Within the institutions in which they work, they stand outside the processes of teaching and assessment and are not identified with institutional structures, so students are often able to relate to them in a more open and honest way about the difficulties they face. At the same time, as writers they are free from the constraints of disciplinary convention and theoretical arguments prevalent in academia, and are thus able to help students approach the task of essay writing as *writing*. Their professional awareness enables them to impart a general insight into the subtleties of written communication that serves students well across their studies. All the feedback suggests that the Fellowship Scheme has been a successful model of good practice and has generated thinking about how writers can use their expertise to support the many students who struggle with writing.

Writing Matters is inspired and informed by the substantial collective experience of the Fellowship Scheme. It is emphatically not intended to be a specialist literature review; neither is it an academic survey of current research into the development of student writing skills, nor an intervention in those debates. Instead, it offers

readers the chance to pay heed to the uniquely informed composite testimony and views of those who stand outside, yet have worked within, a wide variety of HE institutions over recent years. What is presented here is a commonality of concern and a shared vision for the future, based on commitment to life-long learning and to the best that higher education might offer.

Contents

The Introduction by Alan Wall provides an overview of a situation where considerable numbers of students are arriving at university without the skills necessary to make the most of their education. In many cases, the problems occur at a basic level: poor vocabulary, inaccurate phrasing, bad syntax, incorrect punctuation, an inability to form well-constructed sentences, let alone structure an argument. The causes may lie in a lack of teaching of grammar in schools, variegated linguistic environments where students do not acquire a comfortable facility with standard English, inattention to basic writing skills in primary and secondary education, and the different forms of modern mass communication where simply reading a book may no longer be commonplace. Wall argues that much greater emphasis needs to be placed on the teaching of writing skills as these are integral to the whole learning experience, and that intervention can be extremely effective as students are eager to acquire these skills.

In Chapter One, Rukhsana Ahmad and Katharine McMahon discuss why good writing matters so much. At its most basic, good writing means an ability to communicate; crucially it also facilitates the ability to think and study effectively. The necessary skills involve both a technical facility with writing and understanding the conventions of academic writing. Once acquired, these have a major effect on the confidence of individual students, and their ability to participate in the learning experience and to make the most of the opportunities provided by higher education. This in turn leads to lower dropout rates, and allows lecturers to concentrate on teaching their own subject matter. Only if students can write well will the promise of mass higher education prove meaningful.

Nicholas Murray and Bill Kirton, in Chapter Two, examine in greater depth the current situation: their message is a stark one – in the experience of Fellows, large numbers of contemporary British undergraduates lack the ability to express themselves adequately in writing. The authors believe that the lack of attention given to writing skills in education must be seen in a context of cultural and technological change which introduces new challenges. In a world of internet downloading, text messaging and information overload, it is ever more vital to provide students with an awareness of how to achieve clear written communication. They suggest that effective intervention is possible, based on evidence both from the Fellowship Scheme and from universities' own initiatives, but urgent action is required.

Chapter Three, by Carole Angier and William Palmer, proposes a range of solutions, concentrating on the practical and the affordable. They recommend that institutions recognise the importance of writing development for all students and formulate a Student Writing Development Policy to address this. They further argue for Writing Development Centres, and provide case studies showing what such Centres can achieve. Writing Centres allow a concentration of resources, provide a focus to raise awareness of writing as an issue and can offer services across an institution. Practically, they can provide courses in key writing skills appropriate to different levels, assist staff with writing development and provide a locus for student mentoring. Crucially, they should also offer one-to-one support for students. Centres would be staffed by writing professionals, but could also provide flexible opportunities for writers and others with the necessary skills to help students.

Shahrukh Husain and Robin Waterfield, in Chapter Four, focus on ways of intervening to improve writing skills in the first year of university studies. Even students who do not have specific problems with grammar and essay

structure can find the gap between writing at school and the much more complex writing required at university a daunting one, and they often do not understand the conventions of academic writing. The authors suggest a diagnostic for *all* undergraduates early in their first year to identify areas where their writing can be improved, and the chapter outlines how a range of provision can address those needs. The inclusive approach advanced here would remove the stigma often associated with 'remedial' help. In parallel, departments should issue clear guidelines for writing in their disciplines, and provide models of good writing. Universities should place greater emphasis on writing skills as a criterion for admission, and, where appropriate, offer writing courses prior to the start of term.

Chapter Five examines the importance of good writing in the world beyond graduation. Louise Page notes that employers are increasingly concerned by the standard of graduate writing skills at a time when technological change means that writing is more important than ever. This should be of major concern to universities as 'market' developments in higher education such as top-up fees lead students to scrutinise what transferable skills a university education will equip them with. Improved writing support for students is an essential institutional investment that will attract applicants in the first place, help retain students, and bolster the reputation that universities garner from their graduates. Helen Carey and Shelley Weiner argue that businesses may be willing to bear some of the costs. Literate graduates are more cost effective for companies than having to buy in work-place training. The authors examine how partnerships might be achieved.

Valerie Thornton and Yvonne Coppard, in Chapter Six, argue from a pedagogical perspective for an explicit awareness of and attention to writing throughout the educational system. They outline practical ways to raise the importance of good writing in higher education, providing recommendations for lecturers and policy makers and management. Students must be given guidance on how to write effectively and how this affects the assessment of their work. Improved links between schools and universities can ease students' transition to higher education. In the longer term, higher standards in teacher training, specifically emphasising writing skills, need to be achieved for those entering the profession both in the primary and secondary sectors. Awareness of how language works is a vital component of education, along with fostering a culture of reading. Writers can play an important role in achieving these goals.

The Appendices provide extensive material pertinent to the main themes of the report. Case studies provide examples of Fellows working with students to illustrate the range of difficulties students face and how they have been helped. Kathleen McMillan, Academic Skills Advisor in the Learning Enhancement Unit at the University of Dundee, provides a detailed overview of the services offered there. This shows a model of writing support provision that is both flexible and comprehensive. Ursula Hurley, now Lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Salford, outlines the process of setting up a Writing Centre, based on her experience as Writing Centre Co-ordinator at Liverpool Hope University College. RLF Fellows and Partners reflect on the advantages and impact of writing provision in extracts from their reports for the academic year 2004/05. Valerie Thornton and Yvonne Coppard look at education more broadly and give recommendations for schools. Stevie Davies examines why the one-to-one method adopted by the RLF Scheme is so effective.

Acknowledgements

The project has been a group endeavour: the present situation in universities and ways to improve writing skills were extensively considered in a series of on-line and face-to-face discussions. Our thanks to Anthony Rudolf, Michelle Spring and, particularly, Dr Lisa Ganobcsik-Williams of Coventry University, for their contributions to this process and for comments on drafts.

We would also like to express our gratitude to Dr Jean Boase-Beier, Steve Cook, Alan Evison, Frances Fyfield, Professor Graham Gibbs, Douglas Matthews, Kathleen McMillan, Kate Pool and Hilary Spurling for helpful comments and feedback on earlier versions of this report.

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Introduction

The Problem

By the time a student arrives at university, all the fundamental writing skills ought to have been acquired. The assumption used to be that there was no need for teachers in higher education to devote their precious hours to lexis or syntax or punctuation; the schools would have done that, since that was what they were for. Lecturers and tutors expected to move straight on to Wittgenstein on language, or the problematical nature of *Measure for Measure*. In some places this still is the assumption. But it is no longer a tenable view, and the sooner we all face the fact, the better.

Students are arriving at university without the basic skills which make coherent written work possible. This is no longer a problem affecting a few, to be dealt with peripherally by special needs units or specially-timetabled remedial classes. In many places of higher education this year, the cohorts arriving to start their degrees will have a preponderance of students who are afflicted to a disabling degree by inadequate writing skills. The problem is not confined to the newer universities; it is being noticed a little more each year in the older ones too.

In 1999 the Royal Literary Fund devised an innovative scheme. It would place writers of repute in places of higher education. Their brief would be to offer assistance to students across the disciplines. They would be Fellows in Writing. The scheme has been a great success, and there are now more than 60 such Fellows across Britain. As they talked, emailed, or corresponded on the RLF website, it became increasingly apparent that they were all facing the same problems: large numbers of students, often very bright, who hadn't the foggiest notion how to write. They had never been taught how to do it, and so the conventions of discursive prose were either alien or unknown to them. So many of us found ourselves, week in week out, teaching the fundamentals of literacy, that the RLF decided to commission this report. Its aim is to make an intervention in the debate about literacy and higher education, which might lead to constructive schemes and action in the near future.

To put the problem simply, an inability to employ the resources of written language means that a student cannot function properly. Meagre vocabulary, slack phrasing, tortured syntax, incompetent punctuation: these degrade the work the student is doing, and mean that teachers in higher education, supposedly intended for other things, spend an increasing amount of their time correcting grammar, spelling and punctuation, and trying to explain how an essay is meant to be structured. The RLF Fellows found a remarkable recurrence of problems, whatever the nature of the institution or the particular subject studied. The list is banal in its predictability: misuse of the apostrophe, repetition, non-agreement of verb and noun, inability to use commas correctly, lexical nullity, syntactical bankruptcy. The Fellows also noted something else, and here hope might take the edge off despair. All the students we successfully helped expressed something close to joy at the result. They wanted to be able to write, to write impressively, and they delighted in discovering that the same resources of language and expression were available to them as to the greatest writers. It was simply a question of receiving the help they needed. We have collectively lost count of the number of times students have said to us, 'But no one ever told me this'.

An RLF session is one of those rare events in modern education: a one-to-one tutorial. Most of the Fellows have, however, also taken much larger classes than this, and we are all firmly convinced that the knowledge we have gained from our writing classes is transposable to different teaching environments. What have we learnt then? It is hard to summarise the views of over 130 Fellows without simplification, but I will try. Writing skills taught with passion by those for whom they are an indispensable part of life transform the performance of students across the disciplines. Once students discover that such skills are not the magical prerogative of a few,

and once they realise that the teaching environment is not a remedial one, they progress with astonishing speed.

This question of the environment is not a trivial one. Non-embedded skills teaching, such as non-curricular writing classes, tends to be perceived negatively by many students. To attend them at all is seen to be a public admission of failure. As anyone who has ever worked on basic literacy programmes knows, the biggest difficulty is getting people to admit that there is a problem in the first place. Transpose this upwards, and you have the same dilemma with writing skills in higher education. To attend the writing class on grammar or punctuation, referencing or structuring an essay, is to admit that you can't do it. You are at university, perhaps even studying English literature, and you cannot perform the basic routines of competence in your subject. Many simply shy away from confronting this fact, and instead spend three years receiving much lower grades than they might, confused by the scatter of red marks across each page of their written submissions.

The RLF Fellows find themselves in a curious situation. They often have students either from the top range of ability or the bottom. They are visited either by those slated for Firsts, trying to fine-tune their already considerable expressive ability, or those trying to avoid the box marked Fail. Some students have been recommended to make an appointment. But once again there is a remarkable similarity of perception amongst the Fellows. Students both with high and low attainments are frequently innocent of rudimentary notions of 'how to write'. Once again the same phrase echoes in the room: 'No one ever showed me how to do this'.

The Causes

How did this situation come about? The RLF occupies no political position here, nor is it looking for one. Its value lies precisely in its lack of mooring to any berth which could be seen as institutionally partisan. It is partisan in one respect only: it seeks to promote good writing in all fields, both within education and outside it. So let us try to be dispassionate, if not exactly neutral.

The teaching of grammar and the formalities of written expression were once regarded as essential to sound pedagogical practice. Over the last half century in Britain, that has more and more ceased to be the case. There are many reasons for this, some social, some educational. The formal teaching of grammar was traditionally associated with the teaching of other languages, particularly ancient ones. It is commonplace to remark that our terminology for grammar is based on Latin and Greek exemplars. It is much easier to understand the structure of a language if you can displace yourself from its centre of gravity by occupying another language, if only for a while. It is easier to perceive something as a personal pronoun or an adverb if you are learning it from scratch, learning it self-consciously, rather than simply using it. If the student is monolingual then the process of learning the structure of a language has to be a growing consciousness of what is already in use, which makes the process of understanding less structured; yet, ever less emphasis is placed on learning foreign languages in schools.

That's one way of looking at the problem. There are many others. Traditional patterns of expected usage, the system of 'rules', have broken down over the last few decades, for a great variety of reasons, not all of them bad. New social developments frequently carry with them linguistic alterations, and in the suddenness of their eruptions, these can be tricky to handle initially. Many students find themselves living in linguistic contexts which simply don't correspond to traditional expectations, and here they have to negotiate usage and requirement, which is not always easy. This is not a new problem. Many working-class students over the last century found themselves obliged to alternate usage and expression between the home environment and the educational one; many coped by becoming socially bilingual, with one way of speaking at home and another at college.

The home language of many students in Britain today is not necessarily (standard) English. This can be an enrichment, but it doesn't necessarily make the traditional paradigms any easier to apply or enforce.

There is, however, an undoubted pedagogical factor here, which could be stronger than all the other factors put together. The teaching of autonomous non-embedded writing skills, such as grammar, punctuation and expression, went out of fashion. Such practice was seen as old-fashioned, stuffy, unimaginative. It was thought that whatever skills were necessary could be picked up en route from one subject to another; one institution to another. The experience both of RLF Fellows, and of countless teachers in higher education, suggests that this insouciance in the face of the problem might have been a little breezier than the actual situation warranted.

Another factor must be taken into account. Most students arriving at university today are not 'rooted in literacy' in the way their teachers might have been. They are the children of a multimedia world. The consequences of this are unknowable at present. We can see the advantages. These students tend to be more competent and fluent in the worlds of information technology and modern communications than their elders, that is to say their teachers. We might pause for a moment to consider the not infrequent occurrence these days of the lecturer fumbling with a DVD player or a powerpoint presentation when one of the students, often mumbling apologies for such effortless competence, steps forward and presses the right buttons.

What is the effect on the mind of the modern world of communication? Although it's still too early to say, one thing seems certain. If you spend much of your day listening to CDs, texting friends, speaking on your mobile, watching DVDs or surfing the internet, then you are not reading in the traditional manner. You are not reading as Coleridge or F.R. Leavis or Erich Auerbach understood it. You are acquiring information, often fragmentary and uncorrected, often at great speed. You have the technological facility to cover vast areas swiftly. The internet has radically changed our ability to acquire information, but what has it done to our powers of concentration? To access and download internet content is not to learn.

But this is what we are confronted with, so this is our point of purchase. As educationalists, whether professional writers or not, this is where we must find the site of hope, even if we would have preferred not to start from here. One thing is certain: the problem is becoming so universal that there's no use blaming the students. Whoever or whatever caused these difficulties, it wasn't them.

Negotiating the Dilemma

Returning to the happier part of this story, all RLF Fellows discovered the same thing with their successful tutorials. Joy in learning. Delight in language. Exuberant self-applause, as the students realised they *could* actually do it. Once students started to realise that the bright light of literary skill wasn't exclusive to the authors they were studying, but could shine on their own work too, they were often transformed. And here we come to the heart of the problem. How can institutions of higher education offer comparably fruitful experiences?

We need to look to the expertise of teachers in these institutions. The fact is, of course, that most departments in universities are filled with writers. Academics are not only authors of books, and often themselves superb stylists, they write every day - lectures, seminars, handouts, module handbooks. Most academics have the deepest respect for language and the requirements of fastidious thought.

So the resources are already in place. On the other side, the hunger to learn is in place too. The problem then is how to bring the two sides together: how, where, and when? It is true that non-embedded writing skills teaching can be perceived as dull, for teaching any skill abstractly, out of context, can always seem boring. The more it can be 'embedded' the better. This is surely one of the reasons for the flourishing of 'creative writing' courses.

Here the skills being learnt are embedded in the memories and experiences of the students themselves, as they explore a language to articulate their own experience. How do they learn? The way we all learn: by carefully studying the work of others who have shown they can do it, and who in their turn learned through the same process.

Let us look for a moment at music, which has preserved more of the old paradigm than many subjects. How do you learn music? You study and memorise the notes of composers. You attend to the way in which the performers of this art, musicians, play those notes, and you attempt to approximate to the same enunciation of sound on your instrument. So you are reading and memorising, listening to the voice of tradition that says it should be articulated thus, and then attempting to reproduce the same sounds, using the same skills, with your own hands and breath and eyes. In effect, before you can become yourself, you must become your teacher. Only through absorbing the teacher's identity, in a contiguous absorption of ability, will you ever become sufficiently skilled to achieve your own. Artistic identity comes from study, imitation, absorption of expertise. Only at the end of this process can it achieve independence.

How does all this relate to writing skills? Once again fashion has dictated changes. Few contemporary students know any literature by heart. They look with wonder or amusement at lecturers who can recite whole stanzas of poetry. They don't do that. Why? Nobody ever suggested it might be a good idea. Yet good writers tend to know a lot of literature by heart, knowing that this is the best way to internalise another writer's style and skill. Joyce implied to Samuel Beckett that the only way you could truly 'read' another writer was by writing his words out longhand. This was a mechanical necessity once, when essay-writing required that the words of writers be 'copied out'. Technology now makes this unnecessary. Downloading and scanning between them mean that a text can be accessed rather than copied.

How do students of writing internalise those skills which musicians learn by memorising the notes and learning the intonations? If it is not by memorising (and it would be hard to bring that particular practice back), then it must be by close reading; this applies across the disciplines, as much to Engineering as to Philosophy. Such close reading can be of writing by others, or by the students themselves. A person who is writing badly must be shown how to do it better. That means showing the student better writing. The tutor can correct the text the student has written, rewrite it with the student, and show why the new version is so much better; why, for example, 'steer' is so much more potent in that sentence than 'go'; why this sentence structure makes for a more dynamic syntactic shape than that one; why a comma simply isn't strong enough to separate two long, fully independent clauses. This is close reading, followed by scrupulous writing. The other form of close reading is simply to take exemplary passages of relevant writing and help the student to read them with the same degree of focused attentiveness that a musical student must employ while studying a score.

All this has to be presented to the student with some zest, so that it is not perceived as a chore, and in a manner that takes account of the student's own level. If the skills are perceived as acquirable and attractive, then that is where the internalisation begins, the internalisation which is inseparable from the acquisition of any skill.

Recommendations

It is hoped that this report will form part of a discussion with those who teach in higher education. For this reason the recommendations that follow are provisional.

Students who are not communicating properly are not thinking properly, since writing skills form such an essential part of the process of thought for most of us. In the experience of many RLF Fellows, students are

often more articulate as speakers than as writers. This indicates that native linguistic vigour and inventiveness is blunted when the writing process occurs. Writing, which should facilitate expression, is instead blocking it.

The recommendations laid out in our report can all be summed up in a single phrase: more and better teaching of writing. This can take any number of forms: tutorials, lectures, seminars, handouts, guidebooks, videos, audio tapes – whatever is appropriate in the context. Unfortunately, although the problems are not far from being universal, the means of addressing them are seldom part of any core teaching programmes. The RLF Fellowship Scheme overcomes this by situating practising writers within the university. Returning to the musical analogy, this can feel more like a masterclass than a back-to-basics session. Masterclasses, courses in literary style, expertise in writing: such phrases do not sound remedial, for they connote finesse and fine-tuning, rather than rudimentary incompetence. The keywords to be used in this area are important and deserve more thought.

Writing skills should not be understood as relating exclusively to the Humanities. One of the Fellows taught physicists how to improve their writing skills. Here the main problem was a fundamental distrust of discursive prose: it wasn't 'real science'. Real science was made up of theorems and equations. Discursive prose was imprecise and suspect, associated as it was with other, softer subjects. The Fellow tackled this problem by presenting students with excellent writing by serious scientists. Passages were taken from Martin Rees and Primo Levi, from Darwin and Einstein. The students immediately started to change their view of the matter. Why? It had become attractive to them. Writing needs to be treated with some sensitivity to subject. All recommendations are not infinitely transposable. Different conventions and expectations apply. Say 'Q.E.D.' to a group of historians and they will probably assume you are saying the matter has been demonstrated, *quod erat demonstrandum*. Say it to a group of physicists and they will assume you are talking about quantum electrodynamics. Our language is skewed towards our interests and training. The way we write reflects this.

Good writing opens the doors of perception. It renews our acquaintance with reality by de-familiarising it and showing it to us as though we had never seen it before. It engages the intellect, activates memory. It informs and astonishes; shocks and delights. So why make the learning of the skills that make it possible dull? Let us see if, all working together, we can bring some excitement to the subject. All the RLF Fellows over the last few years have felt able to do this, in radically different types of institution. In the hope that we might all collaborate to bring it about in many more places, this report is offered. We look forward to your response.

Alan Wall

Department of English, University of Chester

and former RLF Fellow, University of Warwick and Liverpool John Moores University

**The Benefits of Good Writing:
Or Why does it Matter that Students Write Well?**

Rukhsana Ahmad and Katharine McMahon

Introduction

At its most beautiful and complex, excellent writing crystallises into art. The lyrical poem, unforgettable play, haunting novel, powerful essay or compelling film are all collections of words. Even when writing neither seeks nor attains artistic status, for many of us it is the familiar and preferred route to self-expression and action. We use the written word to affirm and connect, to protest and defend, demand and proclaim, inform and persuade. Through writing we can explore, understand and formulate elusive and complex ideas, share information and engage in debate. This process does as much to elucidate our own thoughts as it does to communicate them to others.

But the most functional and elementary role of good writing is antecedent to its creative and expressive forms and modes. This resides in good writing's capacity to transmit, interpret and extend our inheritance of learning over the ages, passing it on to future generations with as much clarity and exactitude as possible. This aspect of writing is the most pertinent to teaching and learning within an academic context. It is, therefore, imperative that our universities and institutions of higher education enable students to achieve the highest possible standard of writing.

This chapter will first explore the term 'good writing' and its qualities, and then establish the benefits to the student, the university and the wider community of ensuring that students at all levels can write well. The shadow side will also be explored. What happens to students who lack the confidence, motivation and skills to write effectively – and what are the implications for their degree course, their personal development and for those who teach or study with them?

What is Good Writing?

The value of teaching children rules of written language at an early age has been hotly debated. Feelings run high about how strictly a piece of writing should conform to rules and conventions in order to be deemed acceptable, ranked for quality and accorded any value. Unarguably, however, a student in higher education needs sufficient command of the language – facility with its grammar, vocabulary and spelling – to be able to convey meaning, whether simple or complex, factual or constructed.

Anyone embarking on a substantial piece of writing needs mastery of these skills, just as mathematicians need to know elementary arithmetic or artists the properties of their chosen medium. Through language, the writer controls and defines meaning for the reader, establishing the terms for a shared experience. The writer's vocabulary must be broad enough to allow flexible and subtle

adaptation to a variety of genres, subjects and readerships. The style of a piece of writing must be coherent, so that the reader is not confused by random use of tenses or half-finished sentences; the text must be punctuated and divided into paragraphs that enable the reader to follow the argument with ease.

For academic writing, students must also learn how to reference quotations, produce a bibliography and use titles and subheadings. This is partly convention, partly shorthand, and partly an understanding of the intellectual framework of the essay form. Students who learn how to reference correctly are able to verify their sources, and double-check their quotations for accuracy and fair interpretation, thereby locating knowledge and ideas within a scholarly tradition. Through this process, they can trace the origin and evolution of debates in the context of their discipline. Conversely, a failure to understand how to credit and incorporate relevant material into their own writing can sometimes lead a student into intentional or inadvertent plagiarism.

These are the very basic skills that a student writer needs. But of course, good writing is about style and the shaping of content as well as technical accuracy. While it begins with the search for the right information, a good idea or an original insight, it goes on to bring into play sophisticated skills such as the collating and sorting of material, the process of selecting and discarding, of organising, planning and developing an argument. A command of structure, language and material allows the writer to be bold and searching, to explore and expand an argument where necessary, to use metaphor and analogy, to make connections and to draw original conclusions. In good writing, how something is said is integral to what is said.

Good writing, therefore, communicates clearly, fluently and informatively; excellent writing is all that, but original and creative too. A useful definition of the term 'creativity' is offered in the paper *All Our Futures*,¹ which aimed to restore creativity to UK classrooms. In the paper, creativity is described as: 'Imaginative activity fashioned so as to produce outcomes that are both original and of value'. Except for the most routine of assignments – lists, reports and notes – this quality of creativity is perceptible in the very best writing, which can generate something more intuitive, exciting and coherent than the writer thought possible at the start of work. By writing, connections are made, means of expression found and subconscious preoccupations revealed. Such work is exciting to write, and to read.

The ability to write well is, however, predicated on one other fragile ingredient: confidence. Confidence is central to all kinds of writing and self-expression. In order to write well, students need to be sure that they have something to say, the skills to say it, and a belief that what they have to say will matter to the reader. Confidence makes the difference between a tentative piece of writing which hedges its bets and attempts to cover all arguments, and a piece of writing that is assertive, searching and powerful. A confident student is never tempted to imitate. Originality begins with self-confidence.

The Benefits of Good Writing

Good writing is the passport to achievement for the individual student. Ultimately, it also yields more subtle and far-reaching advantages in relation to the health of the university as an institution, the vigour of society and the confidence of graduate employers.

For the Student...

Students who can write well have in their grasp the key to belonging fully to the university community. Because writing is integral to the assessment processes on which most UK universities rely, it is writing that enables students to enter profoundly into their studies. Their development as writers is the true reflection of their academic progress. The most usual means of assessment – written examinations, essays, seminar papers, lab reports and dissertations – are obvious, but a recent study by Lisa Ganobcsik-Williams identified as many as 64 different forms of writing that students may be required to use.² These may include non-traditional materials such as journals, OHP/powerpoint slides, logbooks, commentaries, scenarios and technical reports. Small wonder, then, that students need to be versatile writers to survive.

Tutors and examiners respond like any other readers. Good writing pleases them. A well-presented piece with numbered pages elicits confidence and pleasure; if the information is clearly headed, states its intent and leads the reader through the contents in an organised, logical way, the reader is engaged and convinced, and if the conclusion is apposite and neat, the reader will feel satisfied.

Instead of groping for the way forward, the student who can write well can use writing as a tool which both articulates meaning and extends the learning process. Whatever other circumstances – from perplexity or overwork to emotional turmoil – may obstruct their progress, at least competent writers know that their writing skills will not fail them. Quite simply, those who can write well have the potential to achieve, both in their course-work and in their exams. They are at an enormous advantage.

However, there are deep-seated benefits to good writing, beyond the achievement of excellent grades. In shaping ideas, in finding the right expression for them, a writer taps into the subconscious mind, through memory, imagination and intuition, eliciting insights and connections that might not otherwise have emerged. One of the pleasures of being a Royal Literary Fund Fellow is to hear students say that they understand something better because they have had to write about it. For some people writing is akin to the process of thinking: the two may be almost synonymous, so that the very act of writing becomes revelatory. For others, writing may be more a developmental process through which thought is shaped, evolved and defined. Either way, writing is a discipline, a selective process that gives structure: it can mould a series of ideas into a fresh and coherent argument.

Students who are able writers can develop and express ideas that are uniquely their own, in a style that conforms to conventions of genre and form, whilst remaining original. Competent academic writing releases creative thinking. In the course of working with students on their craft and technique, RLF Fellows have helped students discover that writing is a pleasure rather than a chore. In other words, these students have found their voice, and finding that voice, in the metaphorical and literal senses of the phrase, is surely part of the purpose of university education.

So, the ability to write well produces confidence and fosters independent thought. Creative writing classes and workshops across many programmes in educational and community settings suggest a correlation between writing and a sense of self. Writing, even just for self-expression, can become an invaluable route to personal confidence, which, in turn, develops independent thought and self-reliance. And confidence is in desperately short supply for many students embarking on a university career, given the leap between A-level study and a university undergraduate programme.

Good writing skills help the able student gain access to, and succeed in, his or her chosen career, facilitating communication with colleagues and competitors and negotiation through all the complexities of adult life, private and public life, as citizen or employee. The power to write well, like the ability to be articulate in oral communication, is an essential tool for survival in a sophisticated world. The actual body of knowledge which a student acquires at university is limited and may soon become outdated or forgotten, whereas the practical skills that a student learns may be applied to a diversity of environments and situations. Of these skills, good writing is arguably paramount.

For the University...

If the benefits of good writing are far-reaching for the student, so too are the benefits to the university. A university course is designed to teach specific disciplines or skills at a higher education level – and it will be assumed that students will arrive with the basic skills needed to comprehend the subject and write the assignments which will test their knowledge. If those skills are not there, time and energy are wasted. Essentially, the value of the degree is undermined when students who lack basic writing skills are unable to engage fully with their studies.

The benefits to the university of having students who can write well are far more profound than simply saving time. The world of work expects from a graduate the ability to analyse, to articulate ideas and structure thinking, to engage in independent work, to respond to other perspectives and to present a lucid and original point of view. After all, what more can we ask of our higher education system than that it turns out original, articulate and creative thinkers, able to communicate their ideas – and how could we ask less? So a university will be judged by the quality of its graduates. If a graduate can't write well, the university risks forfeiting its prestige.

And to Society...

We live in a climate of constant change. Unprecedented cultural changes as various as the electronic revolution and the breakdown of deference are accompanied by environmental challenges and radical economic shifts. How do we articulate this changing world, make sense of it, even control it, if we can't find the words? Command of written language matters because it enables us to engage in and create a visible and lasting articulation of all that is happening around us, whether the words used are word-processed, handwritten or otherwise recorded.

Good writing shouldn't be the preserve of the minority: it matters far too much. Such a monopoly would militate against the democratising trend of education, for it is a stated government aim that 50% of school leavers should attend university. The end-result of such an aim, in an ideal world, would be that at least 50% of the population would have an authoritative and confident command of the written and spoken word.

The Obstacles to Good Writing

This, then, is the ideal: a student body that possesses the skills to write well, and goes forth into the world articulate, confident and creative. Unfortunately, despite the best intentions of educationalists and governments, it is often the case that students entering university find writing difficult and struggle helplessly to improve once they are there. So what are the obstacles to good writing?

The first, and most obvious, is a lack of technical skill. Probably most students, at some stage of their schooling, have been taught when to use the apostrophe or what constitutes a paragraph. Yet, very often, those principles have not been internalised and the student may be struggling to find the right word, to construct phrases that make sense, to use punctuation with confidence or to understand how to footnote a quotation. It is impossible for students who struggle at such a basic level to convey a good grasp of the subject. Instead, they will stagger from assignment to assignment, fumbling for words, every essay a frightening obstacle to be overcome.

Some of the basic difficulties that students experience with their writing are to do with the mystique attached to the world of academia. Academic writing seems a foreign concept to many students. Their perception of academic discourse distorts it into the ability to access a weird terminology, not used elsewhere, which bends language into unfamiliar shapes. They feel the need to master this arcane skill in order to join a seemingly alien, exclusive club, in the belief that long words, convoluted sentences and interminable paragraphs will somehow magically generate 'academic' writing.

These two basic obstacles to good writing – lack of technical craft and confusion about the conventions of academic writing – are usually symptoms rather than the root cause of why students fail to write well. A sense of their own deficiency in writing ability produces considerable anxiety, not to mention fear and embarrassment, making the experience of university unhappy and undermining. Many students carry these painful emotional burdens, which are intensified by a mass higher education system that cannot give personal attention to individual problems. Such a pervasive sense of anxiety should not surprise us: students constantly feel judged.

Continual struggles and failures to achieve acceptable writing result in a spiralling lack of confidence. Students suffering this cycle of strain and failure can neither perform well nor get the best out of university. In the throes of anxiety, they cannot think beyond the safe and predictable. How can such students follow an interesting idea without the confidence to risk it being a 'stupid' one? They inevitably fail to seize all the opportunities offered by a degree or even to find the motivation to seek help. A student afraid of the written assignment, lacking the necessary skills to tackle it, will be unable to enter fully into that demanding but exciting area of learning which generates real success at degree level. While the qualities needed to write well include clarity and accuracy, they also encompass motivation, dedication and confidence. Only a confident and motivated student feels robust enough to respond to feedback, identify weaknesses and find ways to address them.

Self-confidence affects performance not only in writing but also in seminars. Students who get consistently low marks because of the poor quality of their writing will often feel unable to contribute to other aspects of their course. They end up, as Stevie Davies writes in *The Human Exchange*, joining a 'community of the shyly silent' which 'exists within the university as a submerged majority'.³ This is

a failure on the part of the system. As the sharing of well-articulated ideas leads to vitality and inspiration, this enforced silence lessens the value of seminar tuition. If only a handful of students feels confident enough to participate in discussion and debate, these exchanges are inevitably diminished, and fail to represent a diversity of ideas.

For most students, their time at university is one of comparative freedom. Part of the value of attending university is that it is a period of emotional, not just intellectual growth. A student who finds writing difficult is more likely to see university life as a series of arduous and unrewarding chores and will lose this wonderful opportunity.

Conclusion

There are many and varied reasons why students who arrive at university often lack the knowledge needed to write well. In most cases, however, writing skills can be acquired with astonishing rapidity, resulting in dazzling improvement, if help is available at the right time and is focused on the needs of the individual student. Such, at any rate, has been the experience of more than 130 RLF Fellows working in over 70 HEIs up and down the country during the last seven years. The message from posts as varied as the University of Edinburgh and London College of Fashion is always the same – once students recognise that help is needed, and are provided with it by a knowledgeable and accessible tutor, they begin to improve and develop their writing, sometimes with impressive swiftness. Occasionally, a single tutorial is all it takes to give the student direction (see Appendix 6).

The ability to craft writing, together with the confidence to adopt a more searching, intuitive approach, can be instilled and encouraged with the right kind of intervention. Unfortunately, at present, the provision of such intervention in higher education may be non-existent, patchy or simply unknown. And yet, given the importance and benefits of good writing, surely every student has a right to this provision. Equally, it is the duty of the higher education institution which has accepted students on to a course, to provide them with the means to succeed.

While the art of writing will remain the preserve of the few who devote themselves to it with passion and commitment, the craft of writing should be within reach of all who gain access to a university. Far from being an optional extra, which a student might take or leave at whim, the ability to write well is a key factor in determining success at undergraduate level and in a future career. Furthermore, it is an invaluable resource when negotiating difficult moments in life. Excellent writing skills can be an inexhaustible source of true pleasure and lifelong learning.

An Analysis of the Current Situation

Nicholas Murray and Bill Kirton

Facing the Truth

No optimistic gloss can be put on it. No artfully crafted explanation will work. Large numbers of contemporary British undergraduates lack the basic ability to express themselves adequately in writing. Many students are simply not ready for the demands that higher education is making – or should be making – of them. The experience of the Royal Literary Fund Fellows has yielded an extraordinary consensus. From a wide variety of backgrounds, educational experiences, political and social starting points, all have reached the view that student writing is in need of urgent attention.

There may be debate about the causes, and about the prognosis, but there is unanimity about what the Fellows have seen. The single word that crops up more than any other in describing what they have found on entering contemporary higher education institutions is ‘shock’. None of them could have predicted that the writing ability of so many students would prove to be so inadequate. Precisely because writers have come to the problem without any constraining institutional loyalties, and without any of the professional inhibitions about speaking out that sometimes exist in universities, their testimony is unique. They know what good writing is – that’s how they make a living – and they can see, and report in fresh, authentic dispatches from the front line, the way in which students are struggling to exercise a basic but vital expressive skill.¹

Education liberates people, gives them skills which empower them to counter many social disadvantages, equips them to claim their place in a democratic society. If the educational system is failing to develop these skills, it is letting its students down, compromising their potential for success in the contemporary world.

Defining the Problem

Here are three brief examples from RLF tutorials with students, drawn from one Russell Group university in a single week:

A student comes almost empty handed, having been unable to get beyond the opening paragraph of an essay that tries to answer how Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy* and another text use myth to define the human condition. She doesn’t know how to start, how to frame the opening sentence, and says that at school she wrote hardly any essays. She has downloaded, from a Google search of the term ‘the human condition’, a dull quotation that lies at the top of her piece of paper like a boulder blocking the path. She is nearly in tears.

A student arrives with a confused and ill-written essay but, in conversation, it is clear that she has many good and interesting ideas. Her problem is simply that she cannot express those ideas on the page, nor does she seem to comprehend the basic components of a sentence. She is surprised and delighted to see the possibility of expressing herself clearly and accurately.

A student arrives for his one-to-one tutorial with an essay containing a surprising number of blanks in the middle of sentences. When asked about this, he says that his vocabulary is so poor that he cannot think of the words. Later, he gleefully reports that a friend has told him about the existence of a thesaurus function on the computer which he now uses constantly.

What is worrying is that these young people are students of English literature at an 'élite' university. They ought to have attained by this stage a reasonably high level of written proficiency, but they are plainly floundering. They have genuine difficulty in writing a basic English sentence. Students of English – who might be expected to have a special appetite for, and flair in using, language – are not alone. Experience across the disciplines confirms the diagnosis. Such failures are common throughout all departments. Much student writing stumbles over the usual obstacles: poor spelling, careless proof-reading, over-reliance on the computer spell-checker, poor concord, and an inability to use such devices as the comma, the colon, and the semi-colon in the proper way.

Many students have difficulty not just in structuring a sentence, but in structuring paragraphs or essays as a whole. They seem to have had very little experience of writing. In consequence, their essays are often incoherent not only at the level of the sentence but also in their overall argument. Absent, in many cases, is any sense of confident fluency, of knowing how to mount an argument, how to articulate it with clarity and consistency, and how to see it through to a decent conclusion without clattering off the rails and down the embankment to end in a heap of splintered metal and spinning wheels. In brief, poor use of language equates with poor thinking. Language is power and without the ability to use it well, students are rendered impotent. The disadvantaged remain firmly disadvantaged.

So Why is it Happening?

Some highlight the 'failure' of primary and secondary schools to teach their pupils basic written English. Others point out that, if universities wish to live up to their marketing hype, they should be prepared to 'add value' to their 'products' (i.e. the students) in every way, and this must include ensuring their competence in writing and communication skills. There may be some truth in both these claims, but they fail to acknowledge the complexity of the problem.

Over the past few decades, educational theories and initiatives have proliferated, often conflicting with one another and imposing widely varying pedagogic principles on the teaching system. And the people who've been called upon to put them into practice are the school teachers, many of whom have suffered from work-related stress at some point as they try simultaneously to educate, baby-sit and police their charges while implementing fresh strategic initiatives. It is difficult, too, for university staff to undertake what they see as 'remedial' work. Often only about a third of their time is available for teaching since, contractually, they may have equally important administrative and research commitments.

The teaching time they do have must be devoted to their subject matter. They recognise that there is a problem, but they hope or assume that someone else is dealing with it.

So, teachers and lecturers are the most easily identifiable targets of blame, but there are other, less obvious influences, such as the fact that young people seem less interested in or have less time for reading than before. Many people see reading as an important catalyst in the production of good writing and believe that good readers make good writers. Their case was made in 2003 by the Poet Laureate, Andrew Motion. 'There's a real crisis about creativity in general and about reading thanks to the way the curriculum is structured,' he was reported as saying in *The Guardian*.² He noted that his students at the University of East Anglia were hungry for literature, but unfortunately their time on the 'educational rat wheel' had prevented their exploring the world of books. Tests and targets had driven out exploratory or serendipitous reading.

Another witness is Alan Wells, Director of the Basic Skills Agency. In his keynote address to the Agency's North of England Education Conference, on 8 January 2003, he noted that: 'Almost four in ten fourteen-year-olds in England are not reaching the level expected of them in literacy and numeracy. And we have a significantly greater proportion of adults with literacy and numeracy problems than most European countries'. It's also worth noting in passing that the process of memorising texts is no longer encouraged. To advocate the practice now might seem reactionary, but some writers have found such an exercise, either because it was forced on them at school or because they chose to do it themselves, to be a fine way of internalising good writing, of filling themselves with the music of language.

More worryingly, there is also anecdotal evidence that, for some time now, writing skills have actually been devalued in the educational system. Some students, with a keenly pragmatic sense of what the system demands, react to this indifference by disregarding writing proficiency. They know that marking rewards the display of bits of knowledge rather than clear expression and originality of thought. RLF Fellows, however, often observe how students are realising the importance of these neglected skills and seeking belatedly to acquire them. Part of the problem is that many higher education institutions seem to have grown a culture of indifference to the subject of writing and consider Study Skills courses to be merely remedial. It's a regrettable deficiency.

Many institutions of higher education seem to have failed to acknowledge sufficiently the need to manage the transition from school to university. It seems generally assumed that all students are in the same boat, that writing is easy, and that if staff learned how to do it themselves without help, then students should learn in the same way. Their apparent reluctance to accept that writing can be taught, and that incapacity is not unusual, can destroy young people's confidence. This is made worse if students suddenly see their undergraduate essays marked more harshly than their school essays. There are many other kinds of institutional expectation (diverging even within the same institution) that create confusion and uncertainty among students about what their teachers want from them. The basic challenge of an essay – to write the answer to a question – is far more complex than it appears for young people who are given little help or guidance.

Anxiety is at the heart of many of the problems students experience with their writing. Some of them have not been asked to write an essay or its equivalent for years and few have ever been told how to do it in the first place. Added to that, they arrive on their course uncertain about their place in the new context, faced suddenly with the need to take personal responsibility for their studies, and bewildered by the apparently hyper-intellectual things they're reading and lectures they're hearing. Unfamiliar with academic writing styles, they seek to emulate, but without guidance, their writing often only worsens. The result is that many of them feel insecure and see that insecurity as evidence that they don't belong in higher education. In short, they feel stupid.

The Decline Thesis

Whenever such matters are discussed, there is one question which is always asked: 'Are things getting better or worse?' The debate in Britain is dominated by the 'in-my-day' thesis, which posits a past golden age when – usually as a result of old-fashioned schooling which excoriated 'bad grammar' – no infinitives were split and arcane distinctions between usages such as 'owing to' and 'due to' were rigorously policed. This is rarely helpful because it encourages a ritual dance between 'reactionaries' and 'progressives' around a central difficulty: how, precisely, does one measure advance and decline in such a context? Language changes; usages alter; prescriptive rules are sometimes replaced by more permissive ones. An insistence on historical comparisons, with their implications of decline, risks deflecting serious debate into political posturing. It becomes a debate in which everyone already knows what they think. In place of such sterility, we need new thinking.

The Message of the Text and the Text Message

The pressures now being exerted on students – the cultural moment they inhabit – are at the heart of the problem this report is seeking to define. The most obvious of those pressures comes from developments in information technology. A predominantly print culture which formed an older generation of writers and university teachers has been followed by one in which, at sometimes alarming speed, non-verbal, image-based forms of electronic communication proliferate. The printed book, however, remains a resilient object, already apparently having seen off the challenge of the downloaded e-book, and – much more to the point – there is no sign that universities have discovered an alternative to the written assignment and the analysis of texts.

It is important, nevertheless, to confront the thesis that the root of the problem of poor writing might lie in the very different ways of using language that are normal with a generation coming to educational life in the era of the internet, the video game, the music video, the mobile phone and the text message. Much of this communication is non-verbal, the expressive medium being the image. Such a fundamental shift must be acknowledged and its impact needs careful analysis and further research. The lives of most young people are dominated by these media. And the domination extends far beyond their leisure time. Their consciousness, their learning, their ways of taking hold of the world, are all subject to the power of the Web and its protocols, in ways that sometimes make those of an earlier intellectual formation uneasy.

Text messaging in particular is often a scapegoat, but the truth is more complex. The language of 'texting' came about because of the obvious constraints of composing a message on a tiny keyboard. It is funny, inventive and resourceful in the way that word-games, acrostics, language puzzles and play always are. It might even teach people how to grasp the dimension of play which is so central to creative language use.

If there is a problem, it is at the point where the text message should stop. In a worst case scenario, the blurring of linguistic registers might result in casual text message or email usages creeping into serious essays. This is not entirely fanciful; many students have real difficulty in understanding the niceties of appropriate register or discourse. At the same time, students are freer and more informal, less cowed – though every bit as prone to anxiety, confusion, and self-doubt as previous generations were. They are used to communicating in a bewildering variety of, mostly electronic, ways – none of which seems to have actually resulted in a disposition to communicate with real effectiveness or individuality.

Traditionally it has been assumed that the aim of education is to fashion sharp, challenging minds that will think with originality and independence. Writers, in particular, have sought to exercise this freedom to think against the grain. Rimbaud's attempt to revolutionise the language of poetry, Blake's wish to cleanse the doors of perception, and various other literary, artistic, philosophical and scientific attempts to challenge the very foundations of understanding are central to the intellectual tradition in which we do our writing and thinking. From this perspective, there is unease at seeing students who think that they can access all the possibilities of knowledge and understanding in a given subject by means of a download or a Google search. That unease is linked to a worry that these downloaders might be putting themselves into an intellectual straitjacket, sacrificing some essential freedom, foregoing the pleasures of independence and creativity. This is not Luddism. It is simply a plea for a critical approach and for a cool, dispassionate examination of the effects – the creative and intellectual effects – of too great a dependence on the internet and the culture it generates, a culture which sometimes seems to elevate conformity over dissent.

In common with the ticking-the-box approach of so much contemporary secondary education, the download culture contributes – in the view of many RLF Fellows – to one of the most frequent shortcomings exhibited by student writers: an unfamiliarity with the discursive mode, a lack of fluency and freedom in written exercises, especially when writing at some length. Creating a living, organic whole is not the same as cutting and pasting blocks of text. The mental movement involved in negotiating the internet, passing from hyperlink to hyperlink, is fundamentally different from the linear progression of the old-fashioned essay or trawl through the library stacks. Many students find it difficult to work their way around a book and its index and source notes. The failure of so many to grasp the point about plagiarism (the curse of contemporary universities) is a by-product of this kind of information acquisition culture in which plagiarism, rather than a guilty secret, can be seen as a good piece of pragmatic problem-solving: 'I need to fill this space and, look, here is the stuff'.

There is a second major consequence of the new cultural forms that are moulding the consciousness of young people. Contemporary culture is very fast and very noisy. Mobile phone calls taken on the run, bleeped texts, music videos where an image stays on screen for fractions of a second, the zap

and zing and bleep of the games screen are hardly conducive to the slower, more meditative kinds of intellectual performance. Or are they? What are the research findings on this phenomenon? Is the relationship between this kind of excited electronic awareness or mode of cognition and the kind needed for prolonged engagement with literary or scientific texts an antagonistic or unproductive one? Is the sustained attention span – reading carefully and ruminatively across a long tract of text and time – at risk from the jump-cutting, the restless, short attention span of the new electronic media? Or can they happily coexist?

Good writing needs a sense of more than just the essay as a log of bullet points and ticked boxes. It needs a developing, long, rhythmic pulse, a tentative, exploratory, probing reach that grants itself the possibility of being surprised, of making discoveries along the way, of lingering long enough to allow an idea to take shape and to form out of the vagueness. Perhaps some of our students should simply slow down.

The question is open: is a culture of short attention spans, one in which the image often usurps the word, having an effect on the structure and performance of the contemporary mind – and that of young intellects in particular? If it is, what are the consequences for traditional writing skills? Do we need to resist some of these trends – or train young people to resist them – or is it, on the contrary, the traditional view of what constitutes ‘good writing’ that needs to be radically recast or jettisoned altogether?

Working Together

Despite this apparent litany of woes, it would be wrong to become too pessimistic about what is going on in universities. Institutions which have benefited from the input of RLF Fellows have expressed enthusiasm and appreciation for the contributions they have made. A number of universities are themselves addressing the issue of student writing, seeking to integrate it more closely into the overall learning process, as this report discusses in Chapter 3; this is surely a growing trend.

Two kinds of integration are required. The first is institutional. Efforts should be made to co-ordinate the various initiatives on student writing within each institution in order to make the most of scarce resources and to avoid duplication.

The second kind of integration is an intellectual one. Fellows are confronted on a daily basis by students who are struggling not just with their essay-writing skills but also with understanding the nature of the required exercise and how to formulate a coherent intellectual response to it. Often this begins with problems in understanding the question. Fellows generally advise their students that they should go back to their tutors and supervisors for clarification on issues that are peculiar to the subject discipline in question. The way in which one constructs, composes, argues an essay on a particular topic, from literary analysis to the principles of engineering design, is inseparable from the way in which one understands the subject. Each has a wider context and is informed by other, external ideas. At a minimal level, students are concerned to know what is expected of them by those who will judge and evaluate their essays. Every time a Fellow tells a student that he or she is not there to give a seminar on *Candide* or $E=MC^2$ but to deal with general writing skills, such a response

feels somehow unsatisfactory. Fellows are happy enough, if pushed, to say what they think of *War and Peace*, China's economic policies, particle accelerators, or any of the varied topics their students are studying, but most are aware of the limits of their brief. The students, however, have no such limits and, for them, form and content are a seamless whole. Their problems are with knowing what to say and, simultaneously, how to say it.

Conclusion

The stress in this chapter has been on identifying areas in which intervention is required. The cumulative effect of such a concentration of focus may seem to convey an impression which is bleak, even negative. That is not the intention. One of the great joys of working as an RLF Fellow is the recognition that we can make a difference. Students are not stupid. With guidance, often on very simple aspects of language and writing, many have achieved significantly higher grades for their written work. More importantly perhaps, they have told Fellows that they've actually enjoyed writing something, or that they understand something better because they've had to write about it.

But that very acknowledgement – that help with their writing has led to a qualitative difference in their learning experience – confirms that a problem does exist and it would be remiss of us not to highlight that fact. This report touches on the many professions involved in education, from its delivery to its administration and financing. It also looks at different institutions and the links between different educational sectors. Let's remember why the whole edifice is there. It's in everyone's interest to help students develop the skills they need to succeed, the ability to organise and communicate their thinking. This is not about esoteric discussion of educational theories; it's about our social and cultural future.

Writing Solutions

Carole Angier and William Palmer

Introduction

The widening of access to education has been a social ideal and an economic necessity in Britain from the nineteenth century. Since the 1960s it has resulted in an enormous expansion of higher education. If we are to remain a humane, peaceful and prosperous society, it is right that higher education should be available to more and more people. But it must be available in fact, not just in name. Whatever percentage of our young people is to go to university or college, it is no good if they cannot stay the course, or if the course they stay does not equip them with the skills it promised both to them and to their future employers.

Failures occur far too often. Too many students arrive unprepared for university, and too many universities lack the resources to help them. Universities today must confront the necessity of teaching not only their traditional subjects – and new ones – but also the skills to comprehend them and communicate them to others. If these skills are neglected, either students will fail, or their degrees will be devalued, and they, their employers and our society as a whole will have been cheated.

The skill involved in academic writing – the ability to understand questions and to answer them – is not a narrow one, restricted to specialist subjects, or to three or four years of life. It is the ability to comprehend clearly, to think clearly, and to communicate clearly. It is a life skill that everyone needs, and one which students are eager and able to learn. That is the best part of the experience of the RLF Fellows who have co-operated in this report. Given time and attention, almost all our students improved, some of them hugely. The question is how the same level of provision can be given to all of those who need it.

The Size of the Task

The UCAS Guide for 2005 lists more than 300 universities and other colleges of higher education, serving a total student population of some 2 million. Each year hundreds of thousands of students enter higher education. Of these, many do not complete their course of study. The national average percentage 'drop-out' rate is 14%; in some institutions, it is over 25%.¹

There are numerous reasons for students leaving their courses, including an inability to combine study with the need to support themselves financially, whether wholly or partly, a situation exacerbated by the imposition of tuition fees and student loans. As this report makes clear, one other major difficulty is a lack of the basic skills needed for a university or college course. Many schools have left students insufficiently prepared for the more rigorous demands of higher education, and

when they arrive at their chosen institution, there are few facilities available to give them the personal help they need.

The many thousands of students who leave prematurely represent a massive loss of time and money for higher education. They also represent an enormous loss of hope and will – for these students must have had a good deal of both to win a place. We squander some of our most vital resources when we let them go. Of those who remain, it is impossible to say how many lack adequate writing and study skills at the beginning of their courses. In our experience the number is large, and growing. The purpose of this chapter is to offer some recommendations to help these students regain and retain confidence through an increase in writing skills.

Solutions

We shall not offer a single ideal model. Our aim is to suggest a variety of ways in which affordable support can become available in every university and other higher education institution.

In summary, we will be recommending that all higher education institutions formulate a Student Writing Development Policy. In addition, we make three suggestions for the further advancement of student writing skills:

- establish Writing Development Centres or Courses;
- clearly present all Writing Courses as developmental, not remedial;
- offer a diagnostic writing exercise and clear basic induction materials in the first year.

The main skills teaching that is required in higher education is not remedial but developmental: even those students who have been well prepared at school need to develop their skills further when they arrive at university. This is the first point we wish to make, for the institutions providing writing services, for the staff delivering them, and for the students using them: as the level of subject knowledge moves up through successive years at university, so must reading and writing skills develop. They are inseparable.

When a recent survey asked academic staff, 'Do you think it is necessary to teach writing to university students?', 90% answered 'Yes'. And when asked 'In your department, is more emphasis placed on teaching competence in writing than fifteen years ago?', nearly three quarters (74%) also answered 'Yes'.² That is: our universities and colleges know that the problem exists, and many are beginning to respond.

The main growth in writing provision has come since the 1990s. In 1995, for example, the University of Warwick created the Warwick Writing Programme, which, as well as teaching creative writing within the English department, offers help with academic writing over the whole university campus. In 1997 Anglia Polytechnic University (APU, now Anglia Ruskin University) in Cambridge established the Speak-Write programme, again in the English department; originally funded by the Higher Education

Funding Centre for England (HEFCE), it is now supported by the university itself. And, in 1999, the Royal Literary Fund launched its Fellowship scheme, since when more than 130 professional writers have worked in some 71 universities and colleges. Over the past seven years they have helped many thousands of students. There are, in 2005-06, over 60 Fellows in posts all over Britain.

In addition, we can take leading examples from some 20 other universities and colleges which now have writing skills programmes of their own in place, from full-scale Writing Centres to small departmental initiatives. As well as the ones already mentioned, these include Chester, Coventry, Derby, Dundee, Glasgow, Keele, Liverpool John Moores, Middlesex, Nottingham, Sheffield Hallam and Wolverhampton Universities; Liverpool Hope University College, the London College of Communication, St Mary's University College, Belfast; and Birkbeck, Imperial, Queen Mary, SOAS and UCL within the University of London.³

We welcome and applaud the endeavours of all these, and of many other UK institutions of higher education as well. We will look at a couple of them in more detail later. But it must be recognised that many of these writing services are small-scale, and funded in short-term and uncertain ways. So far, as Carson Bergstrom says, it seems that teaching their students to write well does not yet 'play a major role in how [most] universities conceive of their mission as providers of education'.⁴

What is required is that all the universities and colleges in the United Kingdom recognise and respond to the problem in the way the leading examples have done.

That is the easy part of our proposal. The question is: how?

The first objection to any new proposal is usually – 'Where's the money to come from?' Standard sources within institutions include student retention funds, widening participation funds, and pump-priming funds; and institutions can apply for grants and awards, e.g. from HEFCE. The Warwick Writing Programme offers a profit centre model, in which the English department charges other departments for its academic writing services. An ambitious scheme might go further afield for support: for example, to professional organisations and businesses with an interest in literate recruits – e.g. everything from the National Union of Journalists to most businesses in Britain – which frequently express their disappointment at the 'end product' they are receiving from higher education (as discussed in Chapter 5).

There is no doubt that solving this problem will be expensive. But the rewards will be immense: for the universities, retention of their students and indeed expansion of numbers; and for society at large, a population capable of playing its part in the new knowledge-based economy. We shall now address what forms the writing support we propose can take and which of these, on balance, we recommend.

Writing Centres or Writing in Departments?

Universities should prepare students for a richer life, not just a richer career. We do not forget this; but our focus here must be on basic requirements. Students are required to achieve excellence only in their disciplines. The main task is to show them that good writing in their disciplines is an essential part of that excellence, and to help them achieve it.

Within departments, advice on appropriate academic language and grammar is occasionally included in first-year students' handbooks and other literature, but generally the subject of writing standards is not dealt with on any formal basis. The difficulty of allocating staff time in what is already often an over-stretched timetable is obvious. Any basic skills tuition is usually allocated to postgraduate students or to the most junior staff to teach; although some see this as useful additional experience, others resent what they see as 'remedial' or menial work. If a member of staff is to be allocated full-time, the further difficulty arises of allocating funding for courses or counselling in what is, at present, a non-credited area of study. However, in the experience of RLF Fellows, students helped in their writing skills almost invariably improve their marks or grades. Devoting funding to this area is advisable for universities if only because, in a coarse trade-off sense, the better their students perform, the more attractive the institution will appear to future applicants and to future funding.

Ideally, as Nick Murray has written:

every department would have either its own writing tutor, or better still, it would integrate the skills of writing into the very fabric of learning, with every teacher trained to teach writing alongside his or her expertise in teaching how to think and argue in their particular discipline.⁵

The problem is that, practically speaking, we cannot see such a wholesale change in the ethos and practice of higher education happening in the near future. University lecturers are already desperately overworked, as student numbers expand, but staff numbers in some institutions are in fact in decline. Staff must concentrate every moment of their teaching time on their actual subject matter. At best they have time to make only the briefest of comments on exposition and expression, which, without explanation, students often fail to understand.

In our view, the best and most affordable strategy would be to establish separate and centralised Writing Development Centres.

The great advantage of a Centre is that it is precisely that – a central, non-departmental facility offering help and tuition campus-wide. It is more efficient, and avoids duplication (or rather multiplication) of labour across departments. Funding is more likely to be attracted by a centrally located, university-wide facility than by scattered projects in departments, especially today, when courses that cross subject boundaries are increasingly preponderant. Properly publicised and run, a Writing Development Centre can raise the profile of writing in the university, and signal its proper place in the hierarchy of learning. Credits could – and, we shall argue, should – be given; and excellence in writing would become part of the skills, status and career requirements of both staff and students.

It may be objected that so far simply moving the development and teaching of writing skills into separate Centres has not always raised their standing. On the contrary, it may have reinforced students' sense that writing skills are peripheral to the criminology or engineering or philosophy they have come to university to study. In other words, the perception of Writing Centres has sometimes seemed to confirm the low status that the teaching of writing can have in certain departments. But this is, we submit, because Writing and Study Skills Centres have so far rarely managed to escape the stigma of a remedial service for weaker students. Changing this attitude would be the first giant step to improving student writing in all departments and at all levels.

Let's look at three examples of Centres where the study of writing skills has flourished.

Liverpool Hope University College

Liverpool Hope University College specialises in Education, Humanities, Sciences and Social Sciences, with a very large number of students studying for combined degrees, and a high proportion of mature students (28%). Only 3% are overseas students.

It is worth quoting what Liverpool Hope says about its Writing Centre:

We avoid telling students that they have done something 'wrong', and seek instead to suggest where something could have been done better... The first step in this process is to draw out the positives in students' work... This approach enhances confidence and motivation, and provides a firm foundation from which to work on improving competence. The next stage is to make clear to students exactly what is required of them when writing at University level... Once the big picture is clearly understood, some students 'take off' and feel that they no longer need Writing Centre support. Other students require specific assistance with the mechanics of writing, such as sentence structure, spelling and punctuation. This is usually provided via individual consultations, where students are invited to evaluate their own work critically... It should be emphasised that the Writing Centre is not just a 'remedial' service... The Centre is a resource for students and colleagues at all levels. It caters for postgraduate students... as well as undergraduates.⁶

It can be seen from the above that the approach of Liverpool Hope is a developmental one, not an attempt to 'remedy' any supposed deficiency. The aim is to guide and aid all students to move on to the next level.

In 2003/04, the Centre was open for 4 days a week, and appointments (usually of half an hour) took up 2 to 2.5 hours each afternoon; the remainder of the time was taken up with seminars and workshops. 302 individuals consulted the Writing Centre in 184 hours (23 weeks) of contact time. Liverpool Hope has a total of some 4100 full-time degree and sandwich students, so we are nearing a figure of 7.5% of students seen overall. A further 1439 students attended workshops, i.e. 35%.

Funded by a start-up grant from HEFCE, the Liverpool Hope Centre employed one full-time Writing Co-ordinator. Given that the campus is spread geographically on several sites across Liverpool, the Co-ordinator seems to have done a remarkably thorough job. In addition to one-to-one consultations,

she organised seminars and workshops in the following areas, with the following number of sessions in each:

What is Academic Writing?	25
How to Write an Essay	16
Writing for Exams	10
How to Reference	8
Writing Skills	5
Writing Analytically	2
Reading Academic Texts	1
Dissertations	1

The profile of students coming to one-to-one consultations is shown in detail in the Co-ordinator's report, but, in summary, it is both interesting and heartening to see that students from many different disciplines were drawn – or referred – to the centre and to its workshops. The preponderance of students from Education and the Humanities may simply indicate a greater recognition of their possible problems by the students themselves.

We believe that Liverpool Hope is a good example of a small, inexpensive facility having an influence out of all proportion to its size.

University of Dundee

Dundee has one of the most established, best developed and most cost-effective writing programmes in our experience. It offers support in special centres to ESL and dyslexic students, and a wide variety of writing support to undergraduates and graduates at every level, devised by the Learning Enhancement Unit in the Centre for Learning and Teaching. The full range of provision is summed up in Appendix 2 of this report. At its heart is the 'Writing by Appointment' (WBA) programme,⁷ which aims to:

support undergraduate students who recognise that they need to improve their writing and learning skills. Students are paired with a specialist tutor who will look over their written work on a one-to-one basis. The aim is to help students improve aspects that may be losing them marks, such as structure, style, grammar, spelling and punctuation.

The point is clearly spelt out, and appeals to students' basic requirement – to improve their marks or grades. It may not sound the most noble of educational aspirations, but the difference between a 2:2 and a 2:1 degree may depend on such simply improvable skills as the appropriate tone of academic writing, correct referencing, or accurate punctuation. In most cases, improvement in any area is accompanied by a growth in confidence and a consequent ease in the future use of learned practices.

The WBA programme offers one-to-one tuition by a team of 12 part-time tutors. The tutors range from local people who are themselves graduates to retired academics and business professionals with appropriate writing skills. A Writing Fellow, financed by the Royal Literary Fund, staffs the associated 'Just Write' programme of support for final year and postgraduate students.

The tutors are thus drawn from the local community and deal primarily with what we call elsewhere the 'nuts and bolts' of writing. This provides a low cost model that could usefully be copied by others. Objections may be raised: that standards of teaching may vary, that tutors are not an accountable part of the university. But where there is an absence of any alternative provision, such a scheme is surely to be welcomed. Indeed, the very fact that such tutors come from outside and are not identified with the university is an advantage: they are perceived as non-threatening and non-judgmental, so students are more likely to seek their assistance.

Coventry University

There is also a recent initiative at Coventry University: the Centre for Academic Writing (CAW), which opened in May 2004. Like the Writing Centres at Liverpool Hope and the University of Dundee, CAW offers free individual and small-group tutoring and workshops in academic writing to students. Its mission statement, publicised on the CAW website and brochure, assures students that 'help is available on topics ranging from how to organise an academic argument to how to improve grammar and sentence structure'.⁸

Significantly, CAW's mission statement also states that 'CAW offers staff individualised support in designing writing assignments and in teaching writing within subject courses. Advice is also available on writing grant proposals, journal articles and other types of academic prose'. In addition to the 427 students tutored individually in 884 hours of contact time in 2004-5, therefore, CAW has begun to fulfil its mission of cascading the teaching of writing in degree courses across the University through conducting staff development workshops and staff consultations, and through engaging in team-teaching academic writing with staff in a variety of subject groups. A benefit of this staff development remit is that CAW is sanctioned by the University to conduct pedagogical research into the teaching of academic writing across the disciplines.

Funded centrally by the University, CAW is managed by a permanent, full-time Co-ordinator, who is supported by a full-time Office Administrator. In its first two years of operation, CAW has employed a .5 Lecturer in Academic Writing, as well as three part-time Academic Writing tutors. The intention is that this staffing level will increase to meet the needs of student writers and staff at Coventry University.

Detailed Recommendations

- All HE institutions should formulate a Student Writing Development Policy as part of their statutory Learning and Teaching Strategy.
- We suggest that the establishment of Writing Development Centres is the most efficient and cost-effective method of helping students to advance their writing skills. Alternatively, departments should offer their own in-house Writing Development Courses.
- Such Centres or Courses should make it clear that their purpose is not to offer 'remedial' assistance, but developmental services open to all. They should, accordingly, offer advice and tuition for all years and at all levels.

- We recommend that Writing Development Centres, academic departments themselves or departmental courses should offer a diagnostic writing exercise in the first year (see further discussion in Chapter 4 below).
- Also in the first year, clear baseline induction materials should be offered. The first task should be to concentrate on the shared elements of all academic writing, including advice on the relevant researching and logical planning of essays, and on the logical, relevant and fluent (e.g. varied and non-repetitive) construction of sentences and paragraphs; and not least on grammar and technical points such as referencing, footnoting and the preparation of bibliographies. It is important for all students to recognise that expository writing should be clear, logical and readable. Learning these ways is the first vital step in reducing students' fear of academic writing as a mysterious and closed system, and in showing them that the writing skills they are honing will be generally, as well as specifically, useful to them for the rest of their lives.
- Later, more specialised tuition should be offered in writing in the separate disciplines.
- As Writing Development Centres or Courses grow and become valued parts of their institutions, they should be properly credited wherever possible. Some institutions may decide to make a certain number of writing credits a requirement for promotion to higher years, and we would endorse such a move. Where appropriate, a qualification in Academic Writing could be offered for students, and possibly for teachers.
- Writing Development Courses, and especially Centres, can also be a valued facility for use by staff members, who may derive helpful advice and materials from them. QMUL (since 2000), UCL (since 2003) and Coventry (since 2004), for example, have been providing such training programmes for academics, doctoral students and other university staff. Through them, a synergy can be created between Academic Writing Centres and individual departments. The Centres would help to keep students in the faculties, by increasing their confidence and improving their work; and the faculties would generate clients for the Centres, and be able to assess their improvement. Ultimately we would hope that writing would become an explicit component of the marking criteria in all departments, instead of, as now, an implicit and unrecognised one.

Institutions will decide whether the passing of a Writing Development Course should be compulsory in the first year. After that, attendance at Courses or Centres should probably be optional. By this point, all students will be aware that higher level and refresher courses are available throughout their university careers, up to and including postgraduate level. If these are good enough, and above all if students can see results in their subject marks, many will want to take them.

The experience of RLF Fellows is that satisfied customers want to keep improving their writing more or less ad infinitum – to the extent of creating a problem, by leaving too little room for newcomers. Fellows find fair ways of dealing with this penalty of success, and no doubt Writing Development Centres or Courses will too.

Where could Writing Development Centres be Based?

In the RLF Fellowship Scheme we have found that the actual physical location of Fellows' offices has a strong effect on the kinds of students who use our services. If the Fellow is placed in a particular department, his or her students come overwhelmingly from that department, and special efforts have to be made to advertise the service to other students. If the Fellow is placed in a Study Skills Centre, or a Learning and Teaching Unit, students come from all departments, but tend to self-select for what may be perceived as a remedial service.

On balance, we still favour separate Centres, with every effort being made to emphasise the developmental rather than remedial nature of courses from the beginning.

There is a case for embedding Writing Development Centres in English departments. If they are placed separately, either alone or in existing Learning and Teaching Units, they may have to rely on the continuance of targeted grants and other special funding, whereas English departments may have their own budgets and could, if so minded, guarantee some security. The drawback is that if the teaching of academic writing skills becomes a permanent part of their activities, and unique to them, English departments may fear being seen as mere 'service departments' to other faculties.

Another possible home for Writing Development Centres would be in institutions' Staff Development Centres. These are centrally placed and reach staff in all disciplines; they are often in charge of staff teaching certificates such as the PG Certificate in Higher Education, which all new academic staff in British universities are now encouraged, or even required, to complete. This makes them an easy point at which to insert into our universities the ideal and practice of teaching writing.⁹

Who should Teach in Writing Development Centres?

We would like to take the opportunity here to urge the use of professional writers, such as those provided by the RLF, and others as well, recruited by Centres from among local writers and journalists.

Centres will be able to draw on the increasing numbers of professional, trained teachers of writing – including some they have trained themselves, if our recommendations on staff training are accepted. Some interested academics, especially perhaps junior and part-time ones, and graduate students, may also be willing to be recruited, perhaps as part of their training. And students themselves could be involved in passing on what they are learning, as part of a peer review or student mentor element built into writing courses.

Writers themselves, however, are the best teachers of writing. Basic writing skills, as we have argued, are common to all genres, which is why the poets, playwrights, biographers and novelists of the RLF have universally found that they can help students. Best of all, practising writers can help to put back into the experience of writing its most important elements, which many students have lost in their anxiety and confusion: pleasure, passion, and the confidence not just to repeat ideas, but genuinely to explore them.

One-to-one Tutorials

Finally, we would like to emphasise our own central experience, which is of the effectiveness of one-to-one tutorials as a method of teaching academic writing. Obviously, this is the most expensive and labour-intensive of methods. We hope, however, that the models we have described show the value to any institution of even a limited provision of personal tutorials.

One-to-one is the best way to learn anything, but especially writing. This is not just the view of RLF Fellows: 'one-to-one tutorials in writing offered via a university writing centre' were the most favoured model for teaching writing among the academic staff surveyed by Ganobcsik-Williams', supported by 93%.¹⁰

This is certainly the view of RLF Fellows. The one-to-one tutorial is at the heart of our practice. There is a place for class and group work as well, but essay skills are best taught face-to-face and step by step, and if the one-to-one session is with a writer, the result can be a perfect package. The reasons are clear. As students themselves say, one-to-one tutorials are 'A private space in which to express doubts, anxieties and perceived shortcomings – very hard to do in a group'; in them 'you can say (or ask) what you want without worrying about looking stupid in front of your peers'. If such one-to-one sessions are with writers, they provide reassurance that 'even professional writers suffer the same problems as students'. And they show that solving these problems can be an adventure, not just a mechanical chore. 'I have really felt the emotion and passion behind what I thought were the most banal parts of writing', one student says, 'the importance of grammar, of really understanding the words you are using'.¹¹

Let us, finally, quote two students more fully:

I found that getting marks back from tutors did not always explain in enough detail why one essay was 60% and the other 70%. When [the Fellow] read the essays, she was not looking to grade, but improve the essay. This meant she was able to point out where bits were muddled or contradictory, show me how it can be altered. It was this process of actually showing and explaining how my writing could be improved that was very useful.

The meetings built up my confidence and made me feel better about approaching my writing tasks (assignments). Overall, the effect was to raise my standard and grades.¹²

This is what all our students need.

Conclusion

This whole report is devoted to finding ways to improve student writing. In this chapter we have looked at teaching initiatives that are giving back far more value than they have cost. We have made recommendations that could be applied to the higher education system as a whole, and that would provide essential and urgently needed support for the teaching of academic writing. They are, we think, the bare minimum of affordable provision.

We hope that universities will adopt long-term and fully thought out policies. But we would make a modest if revolutionary proposal: that any funding should be at the most grassroots level, directed at ground-level funding of schemes such as, or similar to, the ones detailed in this report. If there is to be funding from the government or any other body, please let it not be funding for reports, working parties, advisory bodies, committees and conferences. Let it be solely for teaching itself.

The First Year of Higher Education

Shahrukh Husain and Robin Waterfield

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to begin to examine how the problem of inadequate writing skills at higher education institutions can be addressed swiftly and efficiently in the first year of study, leaving all students, whether struggling or confident, freer to develop their academic knowledge in subsequent years. However, we do not imagine that in all or even most cases the process of improving writing skills will have been completed by the end of the first year alone.

Different HE institutions have different experiences. Highly selective institutions, where entry tests or submission of written work are common, may boast a student population with a high standard of academic skills on entry. The best students, even in the less selective institutions, may not need help with their writing, although, as every professional writer knows, improvement is possible in all cases without exception. However, a fact that has emerged, without dispute, through the various written and live discussions of the RLF Higher Education Panel, is that many students need a significant level of support. Research by Lisa Ganobcsik-Williams shows that 98% of lecturers 'expect students to show significant improvement in writing from their first to their final year of undergraduate study'.¹ This expectation does not, of course, relate merely to demonstrating skill at writing, but to the overall sophistication and academic quality of a paper and its demonstration of scholastic achievement and, ultimately, a deeper knowledge of the field – the difference, in fact, between the work of a novice and that of a scholar.

There are two main issues. First, RLF Fellows have found that the majority of students attending their tutorials write badly even for novices, to put it baldly. Even granted that RLF sessions are extracurricular, and that students are therefore self-selecting, it is shocking that many of them are unable to string together coherent sentences, much less construct a complex chain of thought. As a result, adequate analytic or debating skills are frequently let down by an unsound grasp of grammar and punctuation. In the weakest cases, apart from the actual business of putting sentences and paragraphs together, students seem to have no idea how to structure and manipulate material or integrate their subject matter (theory and concept) into their work. Instead they rely heavily on quotations and definitions, which may be paraphrased without true understanding, in the belief that by providing a well-styled citation they have acquired at least the appearance of academic status.

Second, the efforts of students are often thwarted because their departments have not made their expectations clear. First-year students may not be able properly to understand the question and when they do, they are unclear about the criteria they must meet in order to achieve good grades. They feel that the key to success no lies not in producing a well-structured and well-written piece but in complying with some mysterious, tacit code which they cannot access. This often leads them to attempt to write at a higher academic register than that in which they feel comfortable: they imitate

their tutors and/or the academic books and papers they read, and when this imitation happens without full comprehension, without the broad and deep knowledge of the subject which their models have attained, and without experience at writing, the result is ill-digested, pompous prose and a yawning gap between the standard the tutor expects and the work the student can offer.

These, then – lack of skills on the part of the students, and poor communication from the departments – are two main impediments to good, clear academic writing. We shall focus more on the first than the second, and add a few thoughts on possible uses of staff resources.

The Need to Improve Writing Skills

First, the deficiency in writing skills. Fewer and fewer students appear to enter higher education already skilled in good essay-writing. Leaving aside more general and widespread aspects of our culture (TV-watching ousting book-reading, for instance), on the whole this is agreed to be the result of limited resources and over-stretched staff in schools. Added to this is the grade-focused mentality of the secondary school system, and its (understandable) tendency to spoon-feed students rather than develop their critical abilities. As far as writing is concerned, schools tend to concentrate on specific criteria, which enable them to deliver better exam grades but fail to provide an adequate foundation in writing skills for future education and for life. Equally, writing skills are not a prerequisite for entrance to higher education, possibly because students are drawn from a much wider pool than ever before.

At present, the most usual entry requirement to higher education specifies minimum A-level/Higher grades to ensure a level of proficiency in the chosen subject(s). But in order to negotiate their way successfully round their studies and to build on their existing knowledge, less able students also need to be equipped with sound grammatical know-how and a clear idea of essay structure – a basic tool-kit and plank of wood, which they can then use to construct the required article. However, an overt demand for a high standard of writing may be seen by many non-traditional applicants as a deterrent: at any rate, students often say that writing is a primary source of fear when it comes to choosing a course; and exams, which also require writing, are another focus of fear. Consequently, from the HE institutions' perspective, demanding a higher standard of writing at entry level, or even admitting that there is a crisis, is contra-indicated because it loses recruits. Many of these may be international students who pay the highest fees. On the other hand, it is arguable that a determined effort by a university to improve student writing could play an important part in its publicity and marketing, especially its published Learning and Teaching Strategy, and could also lead to more funding. Moreover, businesses will like it, since writing is a transferable skill, and that too could lead to more funding from businesses. It is deeply disturbing that British HE institutions are producing students whose English-language skills may be worse than those found in equivalent institutions in other countries, even in non-English-speaking parts of the world.

The time may come, sooner rather than later, when HE institutions are required to provide Writing Skills courses, and indeed, as this report has shown, many institutions have already begun to address the widespread problem of poor writing by a miscellany of provisions. However, many of these facilities are available only on a 'need-to-use' basis. Students seek help voluntarily or when a tutor

identifies their need, having read an initial piece of work. However, those who cheat, and those who have a willing and adept friend to edit or even, in some cases, translate their work, may manage to escape the net for a very long time. They thus lose valuable time in which they might have honed their writing skills and, in the process, achieved greater mastery over their subject.

The only possible solution would seem to be a Writing Development module, to run at least throughout the first year. But the question of attendance remains difficult, as not all students, and certainly not all those who need help, are drawn to the courses or sessions currently on offer. RLF Fellows have different experiences in relation to this. Whereas some go through periods of drought during which attendance falls away and they have to work hard at promoting the service, others receive a flood of students. Those who offer workshops rather than one-to-one sessions also find that attendance levels can be very varied. Perhaps, then, such a module should be mandatory, as it already is in a few – a very few – HE institutions.

There are several legitimate concerns about attracting students to such a module if it remains voluntary. Students may be put off attending because they fear being singled out, because they feel their time is more productively spent elsewhere or because they genuinely do not realise they need help. The increase in appointments made with RLF Fellows preceding assignment deadlines attests to another failing, not exclusive to students – the tendency to put things off to the last moment. It is not realistic to expect a high degree of self-motivation among students; they are bound to feel that volunteering for writing courses is tantamount to admitting they are somehow stupid or failing. Difficulties with writing and with drafting essays are very common nowadays, and students need more help in this area. Without it they are not adequately equipped for their future lives. These courses should not be merely remedial; they need to be integrated into institutions' general programmes of education.

Some diagnostic system (more thorough than those very few that already exist) needs to be in place in HE institutions for the early identification of the problems that students have. Diagnosis could be achieved either by a separate test or, perhaps more economically, by specialist examination of students' first essays. Such diagnosis requires the involvement of all those in existing structures (tutors who see essays, mentors, counsellors, etc.), and perhaps the creation of new structures as appropriate. Ideally, however, the framework should not be problem-based: students should attend Writing Development Courses not out of desperation or a feeling of failure, but because their institution encourages them to improve their language and writing skills. In this way a course could aim to improve the skills of those who are already able, as well as those of weaker students. At the moment, any such course is an optional extra and attendance eats into students' (limited) time. They may view it as having no immediate, tangible benefit, other than the hope that their essays will improve and their marks pick up in the future. The solution here is obvious: these courses should be offered as a universal requirement for students in their first year and, eventually, HE institutions should offer students some form of credit for attendance. This would be a real demonstration of institutions' commitment to writing skills.

A flexible, many-tiered approach is required. At one end of the scale, less able students will need a lot of classes on basics; then courses could be offered which cover the essentials of essay-writing from

A to Z, but assume a good grasp of English; then there could be targeted voluntary workshops on relevant topics, such as grammar, punctuation, research and note-taking, academic presentation, referencing, editing, avoiding plagiarism, exam techniques, advanced writing skills such as layering, and so on. A university offering all of this, with one-to-one sessions as well if possible, would be doing really well. A useful model here is Dundee University (see Chapter 3 and Appendix 2), which offers no fewer than 10 different types of course or resource.

A regular complaint heard from international students is that HE institutions fail to meet the promise made in promotional brochures and recruitment drives, to make every effort possible to integrate the indigenous and international student population. Thus students from abroad often find themselves banding together with their compatriots in an effort to avoid isolation. As a result they miss out on some of the advantages of the rich multicultural mix that many British HE institutions offer. An inclusive module for all first-year undergraduates, providing a range of courses to suit all needs, would have the added bonus of offering an antidote to academic isolation.

Another way of co-opting students is by stressing that the difference between essays written at A-level and those written at undergraduate level is generic and not entirely related to individual skills. Students in higher education are expected to write far more complex and lengthy essays than they were at school. It is also worth emphasising that specialist writing requires a grasp of subject-specific elements such as theoretical frameworks, major debates and the acquisition of terminology. If the advantages of attending such courses are promoted as equally relevant and beneficial to all new undergraduates, some of the perceived stigma may be neutralised. Basing these courses within the department would give them greater gravitas, but it is open to question whether such courses should be offered by each department or school, or by a single, specialist department (e.g. a Writing Centre: see Chapter 3) which serves its entire HE community.

Of course, all these measures would apply only after the student has crossed the threshold into an institution of higher education. But is there still a case for some groundwork to be done on the pre-entry side of the gateway? This may to some extent generate a student population sufficiently skilled in the basics of good writing practice to benefit fully from the further training provided by the module. It would also provide participants with a more even skill level, though there will always be those who are merely competent and those who are more talented and proficient; nevertheless, one might plausibly expect such a programme to produce students who are ready to engage more fully with their teaching and to interact more profitably among themselves. To achieve this, HE institutions would need to send a clear message to schools that effective writing skills are to become a central and high-profile plank of their courses.

This may approximate to the standard Oxbridge requirement that marked course-work, certified by a teacher, be sent along with the UCAS application. Alternatively, school students may be required to sit a test to meet specific criteria in basic writing skills – something like the old Use of English exam, which was once a requirement for university entrance. Since displaying the ability to get students into HE institutions is a vital component of most secondary schools' marketing, few initiatives provide more impetus than essential entry requirements. Those who do not achieve the English skills grade but demonstrate excellence in their chosen subject would be required to attend a writing skills course

before joining a university and entry would depend on passing. The result would be a two-tier programme to see the student from school to tertiary education in the most efficient way possible. Then a first-year module could build on a respectable skills base by teaching, through genuine assignments, the skills required for effective academic writing.

In short, then, we are recommending:

- a return, under pressure from HE entry requirements, to an emphasis in schools on essay-writing and English-language skills;
- a diagnostic test as early as possible in a student's first weeks at university, leading to:
- a multifaceted set of options, perhaps mandatory in some cases, for which academic credit is awarded, to cater for all students according to their needs as identified in the diagnostic test;
- the availability of continued help throughout students' HE careers.

The effort invested in developing such an approach would have substantial knock-on advantages. Tailoring a module to departmental needs as dictated by subject requirements will result in the formulation of carefully thought-out policies. These in turn can be conveyed as rational, clear and unified aims to the student, clearing up the confusion that can cloud the efforts of even the most able students at present. This leads to our second topic.

Clear Departmental Guidelines

The second obstacle to excellent academic writing is departmental clarity – or rather, the lack of it: complaints about this have repeatedly been heard by those exploring the question of how best to help students develop sound writing skills. This needs to be confronted, often from the moment of the first assignment, when students are (a) unable to understand the question, and (b) become confused about the targets they are meant to hit in order to achieve the best grades, or (c) do not have a model of what is considered a good essay. These concerns are not easily dispensed with by the guidelines, or even by tutorials as might be hoped, because not all tutors or departments have the same expectations. In fact, this confusion dogs communication at many levels: within and between academic and support departments as well as individual tutors. This suggests, at best, a lack of stated, recognised standards, and at worst an erratic system of assessment, producing a level of inconsistency that filters down to students and prevents them from focusing on the real business of writing a carefully thought-out and well-crafted assignment, because so much time and energy is wasted on the peripheral business of seeking out the 'secret formula' which appears to lurk in the method of citation, the length of their bibliography or the liberal and indiscriminate smattering of theoretical definitions and terminology through their work.

It may be possible to include some guidelines on essay-writing in the 'starter pack' or induction material students receive before entering an institution of higher education. Students often tell RLF Fellows that they are surprised and intimidated by the leap required in the standard of essays

between school and university. A guide to academic essay-writing, which covered the basics but also encouraged students from the start to develop their own voices rather than to imitate, may go some way towards pinpointing and mitigating some of these differences. But if it is felt that students are already over-burdened with paperwork in their first week of higher education, these guidelines could be held over until students are faced with their first writing assignment.

Some HE institutions produce handbooks for undergraduates detailing their desired formats for written work, and directing students to archives where 'model' essays are held. However, handbooks produced for interdepartmental use can cause confusion, because they may fail to conform to the requirements of some departments and will be overruled by some tutors. The collective Fellowship experience demonstrates that at present tutors expect different things from student writing. One tutor may specify the need for a clear mention of relevant theories in an essay, while another indicates that if theory is to be used it must appear only to the limited extent required for the demonstration of its efficacy or otherwise in a particular case study. Similarly, some tutors reject titles formulated as questions, dislike subheadings and object to repetitive cross-referencing, while others demand all of these. Some tutors still object to any use of the first person in essays, while others allow, or even encourage, moderate use. Often, too, the guidelines fail to cover vital information such as, for example, the preferred style for citation of material from a website or a secondary source. If each department added its own criteria to such a document, addressing each area in detail, the result would be an invaluable and comprehensive departmental 'bible' for the student. The pack could also include a bibliography of useful titles, covering writing guides as well as seminal works in the relevant discipline; this would strengthen the writing process by helping students towards a better grasp of key concepts.

The package should also include a 'Guide to the Proper Use of the Word Processor'. This would explain the pros and cons of using the word processor (e.g. that some find it excellent for the later stages of writing, but not so good for the organisation of rough notes and source material). It would have to point out the deficiencies and occasional downright errors in grammar and spellcheck functions, and the dangers of thoughtless use of the thesaurus.

Use of Resources

As always, the subject of institutional resources is of material significance. But the promise of enhancing a basic and vital professional skill such as writing is unlikely to deter prospective students or funds. We are stressing that the profile of writing skills should be raised. Good writing should be prized as the calling card of each institution of higher education and as an invaluable asset in the workplace. As such, the importance of writing skills should be emphasised at every stage, from the primary school, the earliest training institution, to the workplace and beyond.

A number of strategies could be explored, to address concerns of time and resources. Assuming for the moment that at least a component of Writing Skills courses, such as we are proposing, is offered by each department or school, it seems clear that younger and new faculty members often volunteer to teach such courses. It raises their profile, gives them an extra speciality and bulks out their curriculum vitae. As subject specialists they can provide good models of writing, a clear brief of what

the discipline expects and any other specialised information alongside writing advice. The Writing Centres proposed in Chapter 3 may well provide the location for one-to-one or small group tutorials where course-work might be assessed for content and style.

Drawing on the time of existing staff, however, begs a question. Most academics will readily admit that they have not been trained to write, much less to teach writing skills. Their focus has been on achieving academic excellence in their chosen discipline, and although they will of course have learned many of the techniques of writing along the way, they may need some initial training in the teaching of writing. The work of professional writers, on the other hand, has been endlessly exposed to criticism and most are experienced in the business of ruthless self-criticism. Some flexible way of drawing on the expertise of both professional writers and trained academics would presumably be the best solution.

Volunteer student mentors could be enlisted to provide further support for first-year undergraduates, either as part of the Student Union's expanding list of student support functions or by being attached to particular departments. A rigorous selection procedure, based on our proposed Diagnostic Entry Test, would ensure a sound grasp of writing skills in mentors and could be supplemented with training tailor-made for the purpose. Such systems have a proven track record at the University of Sussex and St Mary's University College, Belfast.

A great deal of specialist English language provision exists for foreign students. However, more informal help could be offered for those who, though competent in English for Academic Purposes, still find writing in English a daunting task. For example, language-specific mentors might be useful. An additional benefit would be for language-specific groups to prepare a manual, or to log recurrent grammatical problems which surface in the work of students from particular backgrounds along with methods and practical techniques most effectively used to correct them. The body of information thus built up could be invaluable to successors, and might later be provided as a manual to students. It is known, for instance, that students from different cultures have different attitudes towards their teachers, and that the way students construct English sentences is often conditioned by their native language.

Conclusion

By the time students reach their second year, they are expected to understand and work with more advanced academic content. We believe that the implementation of the proposals outlined above is the only way to equip a substantially larger number of students with the skills that will enable them to flourish in the more rarefied atmosphere of higher academic studies. It would reduce the rate of voluntary and involuntary departure from universities and produce more fulfilled students, precisely because they are better equipped to fulfil their academic obligations. Institutions of higher education would be accomplishing their targets not only by empowering students during their time there, but also by giving them skills they will find useful throughout life.

The Hidden Costs of Failing to Support Student Writing

Louise Page with Helen Carey and Shelley Weiner

Part 1

Louise Page

Introduction: What is University for?

Higher education today is a problematic and changing area in relation to the world of employment. For while it is assumed by universities and students alike that degrees guarantee future employment, recruiters of graduates complain that students lack the essential skills that should equip them for the work place. Students enrol at university without a clear idea of what the process involves: in many cases they are uncertain of the meaning and implications of entering, and remaining in, higher education. Course prospectuses hold out the prospect that degrees will lead as a matter of course to employment, but there is obviously no guarantee that there will be sufficient jobs when the time comes. Within the universities, academics themselves are compelled to question the nature of their role, as they strive to cope with students enrolling on courses with discrepant admissions criteria: whether A-levels, work/life experience, foundation or access courses. So what is the role of the university in the economy? What sort of graduates are universities producing? And where does the ability to write well fit in to all these very different agendas?

Why Good Writing Matters in the World of Work

Whereas, historically, universities were more free to educate for the sake of knowledge and understanding, now they are being explicitly asked to provide a work force. Thirty years ago, graduation generally opened the way to higher paid jobs. A degree was a badge of learning: it was taken as a guarantee of the individual's intellectual powers, conscientiousness and dedication. But this is no longer the case. And, since students are being asked to bear more and more of the cost of their university education, it is natural that they should seek tangible benefits.

Many students are leaving higher education with substantial debts, but if they lack the skills employers are looking for, they cannot count on the ability to repay what they owe. A frequent criticism made by business employers is that too many graduates lack writing skills. This becomes apparent before students even enter the workplace. Applying for any job requires some sort of writing: from the most basic application form, to a C.V. or selection test. But students still fail to grasp that the first impact they will make on an employer is on paper. Once employed, graduates who bring with them only the most elementary writing skills become more and more of a problem as they rise through an organisation. Some employers find themselves faced with a stark financial choice. As Shane Mullins, Managing Director of the firm Fiscal Engineers, Nottingham, puts it:

Poor writing skills cost my business because I, and other senior management, have to spend time re-drafting documents and letters. At senior level it costs the company, in terms of advertising and interviewing time, etc., nearly five thousand pounds, to take on a new employee. I have to make a choice between doing that and getting someone to come in and help an excellent employee who I want to promote but who is let down by her writing skills. But that could end up costing more because I've given her skills which will make her more employable by my competitors.¹

There is now an onus on universities to recognise that the ability to write well is an invaluable transferable skill, without which no student should be allowed to graduate. Literacy pays. Academic institutions face the need to acknowledge that helping students with their writing is not a matter of remedial education but of equipping graduates for life and work in the community. In a world where there are more and more graduates, those coming from universities that are known to equip them with good writing skills will inevitably be at an advantage.

Universities are now run as businesses. To attract more money, they need greater student numbers. All good businesses understand that marketing is essential to growth. In order to compete and survive, universities must sell themselves to potential students. In what is essentially a consumerist ideology, institutions find themselves in competition with one another to attract numbers, and therefore funding. The products are the graduates; the institution is the brand.

Image is what sells to potential students and their parents and guardians. Recent research for the University of Birmingham showed that it was perceived as:

'dull and conservative' and, worse still, regarded as 'inferior' to close competitors such as Nottingham and Warwick. Birmingham is spending £100,000 on revamping that image – including employing Wolff Olins, the company responsible for creating the image of Tate Modern and Orange mobile phones, to do a 'brand audit' to spruce it up a bit and give a new 'edgy' reputation.²

So much for education and expertise. Survival in the profit and loss world overrides considerations of value, as there are financial penalties for institutions attracting too many, or too few, students.

With the introduction of variable top-up fees, the promises to students have kept increasing. The 'more for your money' mentality means that universities promise 'added value' temptations to students, such as sports facilities, transport links and accommodation. To quote Kim Howells, former Higher Education Minister, 'It's going to be a market and a very cut-throat market. It's going to become harder not easier for administrators, and they are going to have prove their worth. In many ways this is a product, something which consumers want to buy into'.³

The maximum top-up fee for 2006-07 has been set by the government at £3000 per student. In principle, higher education institutions are allowed to set their own cost on the courses they provide, up to this sum. But they are faced with a dilemma, for will an English degree from one university, priced at £1500, be perceived as worth only half what an English degree from an another institution,

priced at the maximum amount, is worth? No institution wants to be seen as inferior because it charges less. Vice Chancellors don't want to be seen as running a second-rate institution. As Professor Ken Fidler of the University of Northumbria told Polly Curtis and Rebecca Smithers in their *Guardian* survey into what top-up fees universities would be charging: 'We'd like to see the standard of the university reflected in the fee by charging the full amount'.⁴

This attitude assumes that students will be bewitched into thinking they will get what they pay for. Glossy prospectuses, with or without an accompanying CD-ROM, are produced for maximum impact on the eye, implicitly glamourising each course or module. They list career job opportunities that will be open to students at the end of their three years, and play down the volume and intensity of the work that will be demanded of students during those years.

In this way, the necessity for hype in the university market place masks the reality of each phase of the student's progression into, through and beyond higher education. The final stage is the graduate's expectation of the good and highly paid job imagined at the start of the process. It is interesting to note that a recent poll of students about the starting salaries they expected to earn came up with a figure of £22,000, exactly the same as the current average wage in the country as a whole. If the salary at which student loans have to start being repaid – £15,000 – is set against this figure, some graduates are going to be very disappointed.

Investing in the Solution is Money Well Spent

Universities wishing to perform according to market principles are confronted by the need to ensure that their 'products' or graduates are of the highest possible quality. This can only be done by providing them with the best and most appropriate educational tools, most particularly in those areas where the students are demonstrably weak. It is too easy to see the support of student literacy skills as a drain on scant resources, and to pass the blame further down the education system, blaming the secondary schools who, in turn, blame the primary schools. Putting the required time and money into improving students' writing skills is sometimes seen as supporting students who should not really be at university. It would be more positive to regard such support as an investment.

As numbers and courses increase, and with it the number of students in proportion to staff, student retention is becoming a considerable problem for universities. According to their own statistics, the drop-out rate on certain courses at some universities is over 25%.⁵

There are various reasons why students leave. However, one major and obvious one, in the experience of RLF Fellows, is their lack of competence in the writing skills needed for essays and assignments. Poor marks quickly lead to demoralisation and jadedness. In a world where a high proportion of students work part-time to pay their way through university, a student who falls behind on a single essay can find it difficult to make up the time. Very quickly the backlog of work can become unmanageable; the stress accumulates; and the student gives up, often blaming failure on the institution and lack of support received.

When a student quits, the money attached to his or her place in the institution comes to an end. But in addition to this direct cost, there are other hidden costs that impact on the university and the standard of teaching. Heads of Department are warned that their retention rate is not acceptable: loss of students threatens a reduction of departmental funding. Where costs are already pared to the bone this inevitably means loss of staff. Departments are constantly looking over their shoulders and wondering where the next cuts are going to fall. High-flying staff start looking for more secure jobs in different institutions. Where the student drop-out rate is high, the spiral of declining standards and morale can only be tackled by the investment of more time and money. It is clearly more economical to support students when they need it.

All those involved in university education are worried about the increase in plagiarism; so are those who recruit graduates. In 2003, Ruth Lea, then Head of the Policy Unit at the Institute of Directors, commenting on the standard of A-levels, said in a press release that, as employers, directors were concerned about 'the rise in course-work which risks possible cheating and plagiarism'.⁶

Those students who are prepared to cheat to get into university will also cheat to gain their degrees if they are not equipped with the skills to do otherwise. According to Rebecca Smithers, citing researchers at the University of Glamorgan, a student who is struggling to write an essay, in ignorance of how to structure an argument or debate a point in writing, could easily give in to the temptation to buy an essay over the internet:

A growing number of companies are offering students the chance to buy essays – either “off the peg” or “ghost-written” to order – as part of a worrying trend which has forced universities to examine the authenticity of their students' written work. Those offering “off the peg” essays claim that students buying them will not get caught out by plagiarism detection services such as TurnitinUK.⁷

It might be expected that tutors would be able to spot plagiarism by students with poor written language skills because the standard of the essays would be markedly improved. This is often not the case. A brief scan of the introductory passages of essays for sale on a given subject will often show basic mistakes: Jane Austen's name being spelt 'Austin' for example. Speaking on a Radio 4 documentary, Dorit Chomer, who sells essays to students said:

...basically if I wasn't there doing their work for them they'd probably be kicked off the course anyway and mummy and daddy wouldn't be very happy.⁸

British universities have invested a fortune in the attempt to develop anti-plagiarism software to prevent this happening. Plagiarism not only devalues the degrees of those students who have worked long and hard to gain a good result, but allows plagiarists who get away with it to enter the workplace with counterfeit degrees, not backed by the knowledge they should have acquired. Graduates entering the workplace without the skills implied by their degree are a liability for their employers and a bad advertisement for the universities from which they have graduated.

Not all students who plagiarise do so because their writing and communications skills are poor. But a significant number of those who find the pressure of writing an essay too much for them may be tempted to cheat. Ensuring help with essay planning and structure for every student who needs such help is a far more practical and cheaper solution. While it will not solve the problem of plagiarism, it may present a more meaningful option for students struggling to keep up.

Writing well takes organisation. Time has to be allocated to necessary research, structuring of thought, writing, rewriting and proof-reading. This ability to prioritise and organise one's time is also a skill for which graduate recruiters are looking. It is a factor in good writing that is highly valued by potential employers.

Even highly motivated students find it hard to recognise what an invaluable transferable skill good writing can be. Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu, business consultants who work with half the world's largest companies, specified on their graduate recruitment website:

You must satisfy the academic criteria set out in the application process section of our website. It is also essential that your written and verbal English skills are strong. When listing your academic qualifications on the application form please list the actual qualifications you took and the actual grades obtained.⁹

What is also clear from this is that some applicants have been less than honest about the degrees they have taken and the marks they obtained. Deloitte Touche Tohamatsu recruit graduates from all disciplines and from all over the world; they do not ask for native speakers but for good English language skills. In a global employment world, where English is the most widely used language, students graduating from British universities should hold an advantage, but in practice this is not the case. Some companies find that graduates for whom English is a second language often have better written communication skills than people they can recruit from this country.

The growth of the internet and the use of email mean that writing has replaced the telephone as an essential form of business communication, especially when global communication means dealing with businesses in different time zones. The informality of email communication has to be balanced against the fact that an email is a legally enforceable document. Sloppily or incorrectly written emails have the potential to cost businesses thousands of pounds. Again, good, clear writing is essential. University careers services are very aware of the skills that graduate recruiters require. Unfortunately, they are often not consulted by students until their final year by which time it is often too late for students to improve their writing. If careers services are to instil the importance of good written communication, it is essential that this information be included as part of the first year induction process and reinforced by academics in their first lectures and seminars.

Good writing is not about pedantry: it is concerned with clarity, logic and understanding. Writing at its best helps to clarify thought and allows people to refresh and reappraise their ideas. It is equally necessary in the humanities, in science and in business. In an economy that is increasingly ideas-led, clear logical thought is vital and clear, persuasive writing essential. It is something that all employers are actively seeking in those they recruit. For while businesses will take on the responsibility of

training graduates to fit their companies, they have to be sure they already have good writing skills on which to build.

Part 2

Helen Carey and Shelley Weiner

Meeting the Costs: Towards Greater Public-Private Partnership

Just as universities bemoan the standards of writing produced by schools and teachers, who in turn complain about book-poor homes and a culture of text messages, the final stage in the word-chain – the workplace – reverberates with employers in despair about the written English of graduates.

‘We immediately have to reject fifty per cent of the graduate application forms we receive because the applicants have failed to write anything decent or useful,’ says Linsey Perry, Graduate Recruitment Manager for Network Rail and Vice Chair of the Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR).

‘Candidates have a lack of ability to express themselves in writing or orally, which is a shame because they may be good in other ways. This represents a cost to business and a terrible cost to themselves’.¹⁰

Perry’s view is endorsed by a growing chorus of employers from the private and public sectors, and by research conducted by the Royal Mail showing that spelling mistakes and poor grammar cost UK businesses more than £700 million a year.¹¹ Even more worryingly, a joint report by the TUC and the CBI cites figures that low basic skills cost a typical business with 50 employees £165,000 a year and the UK economy as a whole £10 billion a year.¹² In reaction to a recent Government Skills Strategy White Paper, Sir Digby Jones, Director-General of the CBI, laments the failings of the education system and the knock-on effect on the economy.¹³

Roger Opie, Director of the Head Teachers Industry (HTI) Trust also believes graduates are affected by these failings:

‘There is a growing sense in industry that graduates are no more useful as employees than school leavers. Transferable and functional skills such as communication, writing and comprehension are lacking, and companies often find it more cost effective to employ school leavers and train them themselves’.¹⁴

The proliferation of workplace training courses covering basic written English is clearly a response to this problem. In a day, or a weekend, or over a few days, training companies are being commissioned to plug the gaps in the grammar and coherent writing of graduate employees. With training companies charging around £450 per trainee per day, this is an expensive and short term solution. Yet, while employers resent having to ‘patch up’ skills with which they feel that higher education should have equipped their graduate intake, they haven’t yet redirected their energy to the improvement of written English in universities. As Linsey Perry puts it: ‘Businesses essentially feel that provision of the basic skills of writing and numeracy should be the responsibility of the education system. There is a sense of “please don’t make this our problem”’. On the other hand, with the

growing recognition of the extent and economic cost of the problem, Perry and others are becoming more open to the idea of 'business involvement in helping with these issues at the level of higher education'.¹⁵

This changing perspective is something that higher education needs to tap into as it attempts to address the writing skill deficit amongst its students. Businesses are beginning to acknowledge that it may be more cost-effective and far-sighted to sponsor writing projects in universities than to continue pouring money into the 'quick fix' operations offered by in-house courses.

There already exists a firmly established tradition of UK businesses supporting reading, literature and literacy at schools and among local communities. Tate and Lyle, for example, provided funding for Reading is Fundamental, UK, an initiative of the National Literacy Trust. This provides opportunities for children to choose and keep books at no cost to them or their families. The Royal Mail set up the Stepping Stone Fund in 2001 to support adult writing projects, while the *Daily Mail* and Camelot have teamed up to launch 100 reading clubs in secondary schools across England. Andrex worked in partnership with the Pre-school Learning Alliance and the Library Association (now the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals) to produce a resource pack to encourage greater parental involvement in using books with young children.

There are many more examples of programmes like these, indicating not only that reading and writing skills (or the lack of them) are of corporate concern, but also that businesses have funds available for literacy projects. The challenge, therefore, is to make the sponsorship of written English in higher education appear important and appealing.

The climate now seems right for higher education to take up the challenge. Awareness of the low standard of written English produced by graduates has never been higher and, increasingly, corporate and public sector heads are coming round to the idea that what they describe as the 'basic skills gap' needs urgent attention at university level.

'Some larger companies already sponsor specialist schools,' acknowledges Richard Wilson, Head of Business Policy at the Institute of Directors. 'I can see no reason why this kind of input might not be extended to higher education. As well as the obvious PR benefits, there is an awareness in companies that they do have a corporate social responsibility'. Wilson believes that 'larger companies may well be in a position to offer provision and contribution to more general education issues, such as funding of Writing Centres, sponsorship of writers, or seconding of staff. Smaller companies and the public sector would, of course, find this kind of assistance harder, but there might be other ways in which they could help'.¹⁶

The Chartered Management Institute (CMI) recommends that 'the HE sector needs to devise a clear communication strategy that identifies opportunities for employer involvement and provides identified points of contact for employers'.¹⁷

Roger Opie supports this view, advocating 'much more dialogue between businesses and universities'. The Department for Education and Skills, he advises:

should make a concerted effort to rectify the problem of writing deficiencies in universities. My suggestion is that the Sector Skills Council should be the brokers for this kind of dialogue. The fifty per cent target for university uptake is not sustainable unless facilities are in place in higher education to assist students with gaining the basic transferable skills such as writing, communication and comprehension.¹⁸

Helping Students to Write Better: Pedagogical Perspectives

Valerie Thornton and Yvonne Coppard

Introduction

This report has demonstrated the pronounced need among students in higher education for systematic help with writing skills. The purpose of this chapter is to recommend ways in which students may be helped, with particular emphasis on pedagogy.

Although our recommendations are specific to the higher education sector, it is important to acknowledge a sequential and consequential relationship between primary schools, secondary schools and higher education institutions where students continue to be taught, and where some are also training to return to the school classroom to continue the educational process. To ignore this interdependent, cyclical relationship would be short-sighted.

It is also important to acknowledge the impact of wider societal and cultural shifts – shifts that, according to a survey conducted by the Basic Skills Agency, now result in half of five-year-olds starting school without the communication skills necessary for a primary school classroom.¹ Research by the Commons Skills and Education Committee has also shown that one in five eleven-year-olds fails to reach the expected standard in reading, sparking once more the long-running debate about which methods of teaching are the best for developing reading skills.²

One of the reasons that this sad situation has developed is that in the home, arguably the first and most important educational sector, many parents fail to nurture the linguistic and numeracy skills of their children. Contributory factors include long working hours, often with both parents out at work; the decline of the nuclear family and of communal meals; and the rise of a screen-dominated lifestyle that inhibits reflection and discussion. In some homes, English is not the first language; while children eventually derive great benefits from bilingualism, in the crucial early years of learning to read they can be additionally disadvantaged.

It is not within the scope of this report to explore these wider societal and cultural factors. However, they do have to be acknowledged as failing to stimulate, at a crucial developmental stage, intellectual and verbal skills in our children. The consequent inability of many children to progress to, and benefit fully from, formal education is self-evident.

What we can do is suggest how the educational context might be changed to help pupils, students and their teachers to interact more productively. It may take a whole educational generation – some 20 years – before the benefits can filter fully through the education system, but a gradual and steady improvement will become obvious. This will be a demanding time of transition where each educational institution will have to continue to address the deficiencies in the writing skills of those already in the

system, until we reach a time when children and students arrive at each stage in their formal education with the requisite skills.

Some of our recommendations require changes of attitude and behaviour; others have funding implications. We believe that embracing and realising our recommendations will enhance the confidence, creativity and communication skills of all teachers and consequently of all their pupils and students.

Higher Education: An Overview

As the work of RLF Fellows has been predominantly at higher education level, we have not only seen acres of student writing, but have also been privy to inside information on how students feel that their lecturers and supervisors could be more helpful to them. Our report has shown that students suffer from difficulties of comprehension (e.g. obscure essay titles and unexplained marking criteria), and from scant or vague feedback on essays.

It would be unfair to lay the blame entirely on lecturers; unfair because, like schoolteachers, they are often struggling to do their best within an imperfect system. The pressure to register an ever-increasing number of students, without neither improvement in terms or conditions nor appropriate increase in funding, takes its toll. Consequently, we must hope that those who have power to change these systems will do so.

We therefore make our recommendations in two parts: firstly for lecturers themselves, and secondly for the policy makers and senior managers who determine the environment in which lecturers work.

For lecturers who have direct involvement with teaching and marking, we make the following recommendations:

- Lecturers should ensure that their essay titles and project tasks are worded as carefully and clearly as possible.
- Feedback to students should be clear, comprehensible and sympathetic. Where there are flaws that pull the mark down, it should be made clear to the student what these flaws are, with constructive advice that will enable the student to address them in the next piece of work.
- Students should be left in no doubt about what aspects of their work are being evaluated. The relative values placed on acquisition of knowledge, analysis of information and good writing skills should be clarified. This last component should be an essential criterion in the assessment of student writing.
- The use of appropriate voice in the writing of essays should be clarified. (It is interesting to note that the active voice is becoming more and more acceptable in scientific journals).

In terms of policy and planning, we make the following recommendations:

- Students should display a minimum standard of correct and effective written English as a condition of acceptance for undergraduate study.
- Correct and effective use of English should also be an essential criterion in the assessment of student writing.
- All materials produced by an institution should be written in plain English, exemplifying correct use of grammar and punctuation.
- A Student Writing Policy, specific to each institution, should be built into existing mandatory Learning and Teaching Strategies.
- Teaching staff should be encouraged to reflect upon what they are expecting from their students; wherever possible, these expectations should be made explicit and standardised across departments and faculties.
- Programmes should be developed to encourage good writing skills in younger university teachers who may have missed out on this at school and as undergraduates.
- The pressure on teaching staff to deliver content, unmediated by concern for style, should be eased, and staff should be encouraged to develop and value skills, both in their students and in themselves.
- Small-group and one-to-one teaching should be encouraged, where feasible.

Teacher Training: A Special Focus

We believe that those who are entrusted with training teachers need to acknowledge the enormous power they have to change attitudes and standards in teachers and in their future pupils; they need to use this power wisely.

Teachers, especially at school level, do not usually receive a good press. We believe that it is important to acknowledge and value the skills that our teachers do have to enable others to learn. It's one thing being able to write, count or swim yourself. It's relatively easy to show others that you can do these things, but to enable others to acquire and develop such skills is a professional art. This ability should be better valued and more highly respected.

We believe that teachers should be passionate and confident about teaching. Many trainee teachers embark on their postgraduate professional qualifications with just such a passion. Maintaining this passion becomes a challenge as the time constraints of one-year PGCE courses take their toll. One higher education institution, when offered a Royal Literary Fund Project Fellow at no cost to itself

to work with PGCE student teachers, rejected the Fellow, saying that they had neither time, nor space: 'A gift horse is all very well, but you have to have a stable for it.' (Such a response to the offer of RLF support has thus far been unique).

However, this is also an indication of the extreme pressure that those who teach on one-year PGCE courses are under. We sympathise with the opinion of Gordon Smith, former President of the Association of Head Teachers in Scotland, that PGCE courses should last for two years in order to develop greater pedagogical depth. This would also bring such students nearer to the scope and depth of study and reflection that is enjoyed by their peers on the four-year Bachelor of Education courses.³

This has cost implications. However, if teachers enter the classroom more capable of teaching because they have a more thorough pedagogical training, then the burn-out and drop-out rate in the profession will be reduced.

In addition to the confidence that arises from a sound pedagogical basis, there is also the confidence that arises from sound subject knowledge.

As Professor Jim McGonigal, Head of Language and Literature in the Department of Curriculum Studies at Glasgow University ruefully notes, it is now possible for students who can neither spell with the sort of consistency that would formerly have been expected, nor write with the same degree of grammatical exactness or formality, to be awarded degrees in English, and then be accepted to train to teach children English in secondary schools.⁴ There are various causes of this, but the fact remains extremely worrying.

Similarly, postgraduate students with a first degree in which a formal continuous writing component does not feature are choosing to train as primary teachers. Hence the problem of their lack of writing skills becomes the responsibility of the teacher training institutions, placing additional pressure on the already time-constrained teacher trainers.

In order to redress this, we have to take an overall view of the education system, rather than examining each sector in isolation.

It should not be unreasonable to expect primary schools to establish a foundation of writing and thinking skills in their pupils before they reach secondary school. Likewise, it should not be unreasonable to expect secondary schools to equip their pupils with the level of skills they will need in writing and studying to make a successful entry into higher education. Yet, too often, this is not happening. At every stage, from pre-school to postgraduate, many of our young people are struggling with their thinking and writing skills.

In order to conform to government policy and increase the numbers of students at higher education level, including those training as teachers, higher education entry standards have had to be lowered. We should eschew the false economy (and short-term solution) of widening access at the expense of standards. Furthermore, we need to entice the brightest minds into teaching by making it a valued

and rewarding career. This involves quality training and a salary that compares with other occupations that do attract the brightest graduates. But it also involves high quality support and mentoring for new teachers, so that we do not lose them to exhaustion and cynicism within their first couple of years.

We therefore offer the following recommendations:

- High standards of writing skills and subject knowledge should be established as prerequisites for trainee teachers.
- Entry standards should be maintained: quality, rather than quantity, should be a priority.
- Writing skills, both academic and creative, should be a compulsory component of teacher training both in primary and secondary sectors. There should be time within their training period for student teachers to undertake assignments that develop skills in reading, writing, evaluative discussion, research and studying. Such assignments should be both in their own subject areas and in educational studies.
- An enrichment course in children's literature, as endorsed by Michael Morpurgo,⁵ the former Children's Laureate, should also be a compulsory element for student primary teachers. Furthermore, in line with our later recommendations that writers should be placed in all educational institutions, their presence in those faculties that train teachers should be the norm rather than the exception.
- The current emphasis on 'teaching to the test' should be diminished. Instead, more emphasis should be placed on critical skills training, for pupils, teachers and trainee teachers. Crucial to successful study, these intellectual, creative, organisational and social skills also enhance the confidence of those who take part.

Professional Writers in Educational Institutions

Naturally, as RLF Fellows and writers ourselves, we believe that the presence of professional writers as teachers and role models in educational institutions can only be beneficial. While it could be argued that we are, in part, compensating for an education system that currently ill equips school pupils for the kind of writing expected of them at university level, the input of professional writers goes beyond redressing deficiencies in skills. Writers' creativity, pleasure in language and the high value they place on effective communication can complement the work of academics. Many writers have experience of working in schools. We believe the ability of writers to inspire both pupils and teachers should be exploited more. While single visits can be both helpful and entertaining in the short term, greater long-term benefit comes from a professional relationship with a writer sustained over a number of weeks. Working both with pupils and teachers can enhance the creativity of both parties.

We therefore recommend that:

- Educational institutions should liaise with their local Arts Council if in England and Wales, or with the Scottish Book Trust and Scottish Arts Council in Scotland, and with other relevant bodies to promote writers/artists-in-schools programmes and encourage every school to make use of visiting professionals in the creative arts.

Communication between Educational Sectors

While communication between primary and secondary schools is well established, there seems to be less helpful dialogue between secondary schools and HE institutions. Presumably the compulsory element of education up to the age of 16, coupled with the fact that secondary schools very often have feeder primaries, makes dialogue across these sectors both necessary and easier. However, if 50% of our young people are hoping to benefit from higher education, then formal dialogue between representatives of the secondary and higher education sectors is also essential.

We recommend:

- HE institutions and secondary schools work together as extensively as possible to ensure that good pupils make the transition to good students.
- Secondary school pupils might perhaps be given experience of reading and writing academic work. Samples of first-year student work, across a range of subjects, could be given to senior school pupils, to show them and their teachers the kind of work that will be expected.

Reading

As writers, we are naturally keen to promote reading as an enjoyable activity. However, reading also brings wider educational and cultural benefits.

Good writing skills are much more readily acquired by those who read frequently and widely. We believe that reading should be promoted and encouraged at all stages. Young children should be read to – they love this and at the same time they are absorbing the cadences of written English and expanding their vocabulary and their capacity for empathy and imagination.

Enabling young people to make the transition from having books read to them to reading for themselves is also important. Parents, teachers and librarians can all contribute. Children who read become better at spelling because of their exposure to correctly spelt words. Too many youngsters are floundering in a phonetic world where they struggle gamely to produce words that, no matter how they spell them, they could never recognise as correctly spelt because they simply do not see much written English beyond the classroom. For example, the following words come from a story written by an 11-year-old boy: 'thisil... horesman... haun draun and quaterd... inisent... betrade...'. He doesn't flinch from flaunting his vocabulary but his verbal skills are not matched by his spelling ability. He comes from a home without books.

One note of optimism is the Bookstart scheme. This scheme gives every baby a selection of books and every mother advice about reading. It operates throughout the UK via the Health Visitor service and is to be extended to include three-year-olds. This will help enormously to encourage the reading habit at an early age (especially if it can be extended to grow with these children throughout their primary education), but in the meantime we make the following recommendations:

- Time should be set aside each day, in both primary and secondary schools, for private reading. Michael Morpurgo suggests the last half hour of the primary school day might be most beneficial. Some of the secondary schools which already do this find the first twenty minutes of the day, combining the exercise with registration time, to be more practical.
- Ideally, teachers should also read, and be seen to be reading, during this time to promote positive role models.

Rewarding Excellence

Aspiration should be encouraged in all sectors of education, with recognised rewards for those who substantially improve their own performance over the year and for those whose efforts and ability place them ahead of the rest. Prizes should reward the most able pupils for doing their best, not just on the sports field but also in the fields of numeracy and literacy.

There has been a justifiable emphasis on helping less able pupils but it has been at the expense of the most able. The decline of emphasis on academic talents does little, in reality, to improve the lot of those struggling with basic skills. Meanwhile, it fails to stretch and develop our most able youngsters: it should be cool to be clever.

Greater priority should be given to identifying and supporting the most gifted and able pupils, so that they may realise their full potential. Organisations such as the National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth (NAGTY) and the Scottish Network for Able Pupils (SNAP) can provide advice and assistance.

Grammar

Grammar has been neglected for many years because it has become unfashionable to teach it in schools. Many young people now cannot use English correctly and are increasingly discouraged from studying foreign languages because of their low level of linguistic awareness. Professor Joe Farrell of Strathclyde University's Italian department says: 'We in our department have found ourselves obliged to recast our first-year courses to provide what is often no more than remedial education. The teaching of languages is hampered by students' lack of knowledge of the workings or structure of any language, including their own'.⁶

Professor Farrell also claims that things which require hard work have been eliminated from the Scottish educational system and that we expect too little from our young people. The experience of

RLF Fellows working across the UK has shown that this is not a uniquely Scottish problem. Yet it is generally recognised that communication by language, whether oral or written, is one of the most important prerequisites for success in the modern age.

There is a widely held belief that grammar is difficult, and 'puts pupils off'. However, education cannot be effective if it is based on avoiding any concepts or theories that might be difficult to grasp.

We therefore recommend that:

- Children should be taught not only grammar, but the history and origins of the English language (and its relationships with other modern languages) with the aims of enhancing their powers of analysis and comprehension, increasing their linguistic awareness and giving them more confidence in both writing and speaking.

Conclusion

These perspectives and recommendations are the result of our experiences both as Royal Literary Fund Fellows and as writers working in higher education institutions with students on their academic writing.

All our recommendations are motivated by an altruistic desire to improve the writing skills and confidence of our young people. We have no political or personal axes to grind. We see and we say. We hope those with power to effect change will listen and act.

Conclusions

The transformation of British higher education to a mass system has been, and remains, a demanding process. It is taking place in a context of stretched resources, and at a time of rapid technological, social and economic change. To take advantage of the opportunities of education, students have to be able to express themselves in writing with clarity and fluency, and to improve their writing skills throughout their time at university. Sustained and effective writing development is a crucial part of higher education.

From the perspective of university management, the case is a straightforward one. In the short term, low student retention rates entail a loss of income. In the longer term, students who graduate without the expected skills can only damage an institution's reputation. Staff frustrated by the poor quality of student work and an inability to get on with the job for which they were employed will burn out. Employers increasingly express concerns about graduate skill levels. As some institutions do increase and develop their writing support provision, they give themselves a competitive advantage.

The issues around student writing are multi-faceted. In the experiences of RLF Fellows working in widely different institutions, the same themes recur. Students are finding the intellectual transition from school to university difficult. During a period which is already hard enough, they find that their writing is letting them down; they don't know what to do about it and they begin to lose confidence. The same applies to those entering higher education through alternative routes. All these students need to reach beyond the apparent mystery of academic writing to develop their own ability to write.

There are certain skills that need to be acquired by those who lack them - how to write grammatically correct prose, how to use punctuation, how to define what they think and then say it, how to structure an essay. There is no avoiding the need for dedicated professional support for students; this report strongly recommends the establishment of well funded Writing Development Centres in order to attach proper influence to the importance of writing, provide support throughout an institution and bolster a culture of writing.

Institutions must take a proactive approach – they should develop a Writing Development Policy to address the particular requirements of their own students and their own situation. A diagnostic for all students, perhaps as simple as submission of a sample of their writing, either prior to university entry or early in the first term can identify the immediate areas in which students need to improve. A variety of provision can then address those needs: intensive writing classes, general study skills sessions, writing development courses, tutorial support, guidance on how to write in the disciplines. The particular conventions of individual departments should be made explicit to students, and they should be shown, through examples, what constitutes good writing, and why.

Not all students require extensive support; in the experience of RLF Fellows many benefit greatly from intensive attention. Individual tutorials are extremely effective in addressing the particular concerns of a student. They provide a non-judgmental space where students can admit worries which they would not express either in front of their peers, nor share with course tutors. Intelligent, articulate

students still struggle with writing; sitting down and talking through the process can help them enormously. They begin to see that the key to good writing is effective communication.

Increased support for writing development in universities will take up time and resources, and will require increased funding. It is, however, vital to fulfil the promise of higher education, and the tangible benefits will be manifold.

Chapter 1

¹ National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education, chaired by Professor Ken Robinson. (1999). *All our Futures: Creativity, Culture and Education*.
<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/naccce/index1.shtml>

² Lisa Ganobcsik-Williams. (2004). *A Report on the Teaching of Academic Writing in UK Higher Education*. Available by download from: <http://www.rlf.org.uk/fellowshipscheme/research.cfm>

³ Stevie Davies. (2004). *Royal Literary Fund Fellowships: the Human Exchange*. Appendix 6 of this volume, p.85. Available separately by download from:
<http://www.rlf.org.uk/fellowshipscheme/research.cfm>

Chapter 2

¹ See Appendices 1 and 4.

² Nicholas Pyke, 'Motion attacks curriculum', *The Guardian*, 7 March 2003.

Chapter 3

¹ Figures for 2002/03 from the Higher Education Statistics Agency. *Performance Indicators in Higher Education in the UK 2002/03*.

² Lisa Ganobcsik-Williams. (2004). 'A National Survey of Staff Perspectives on the Teaching of Academic Writing in Higher Education', in *A Report on Academic Writing in Higher Education*, p. 29. We draw heavily on this report in what follows and we would like to thank Lisa here for her valuable work. Available by download from: <http://www.rlf.org.uk/fellowshipscheme/research.cfm>

³ For a detailed survey of writing support provision, see Ganobcsik-Williams, op. cit. pp. 29-37.

⁴ Carson Bergstrom. (2004). 'The Status of Writing in the University'. *English Subject Centre Newsletter* 6: 10-13, p. 10, cited in Ganobcsik-Williams, op. cit. p. 37.

⁵ Nick Murray. (2005). *Helping Saima*, p. 8, unpublished ms.

⁶ All facts and figures in this section are for the academic year 2003-04 and are taken from *The Writing Centre Annual Monitoring Report 2003/2004*, Liverpool Hope University College, (2005). For details of how the Centre was set up, see Appendix 3 of this volume.

⁷ See also: <http://www.dundee.ac.uk/learning/leu/wba.htm>

⁸ See: <http://www.coventry.ac.uk/caw>

⁹ We thank Lisa Ganobcsik-Williams for this idea and the reasoning behind it, based on her own research.

¹⁰ Ganobcsik-Williams, op. cit. p. 28.

¹¹ All quotes taken from Stevie Davies. (2004). *Royal Literary Fund Fellowships: the Human Exchange*. Included as Appendix 6 of this volume. Available separately by downloading from: <http://www.rlf.org.uk/fellowshipscheme/research.cfm>

¹² Davies, op.cit. This volume, p.105.

Chapter 4

¹ Lisa Ganobcsik-Williams. (2004). *A Report on the Teaching of Academic Writing in UK Higher Education*, p. 13. <http://www.rlf.org.uk/fellowshipscheme/research.cfm>

Chapter 5

¹ Shane Mullins, personal correspondence.

² <http://education.guardian.co.uk/administration/story/0,,1296852,00.html>

³ <http://education.guardian.co.uk/students/tuitionfees/story/0,12757,1311629,00.html>

⁴ <http://education.guardian.co.uk/students/tuitionfees/story/0,12757,1308882,00.html>

⁵ Higher Education Statistics Agency. *Performance Indicators in Higher Education in the UK 2002/03*.

⁶ <http://www.epolitix.com/NR/rdonlyres/A0CEDA98-FC29-41D6-83DA-00AD4BDF9B8A/0/140803.htm>
See also: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/3150189.stm>

⁷ <http://education.guardian.co.uk/higher/news/story/0,,1454793,00.html>

⁸ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/4445357.stm>

⁹ <http://graduates.deloitte.co.uk>, March 2005. Page link no longer live.

¹⁰ Telephone interview with Linsey Perry, 18 May 2005.

¹¹ Survey conducted by the Royal Mail in 2003. Of 1,000 people questioned, more than 33 per cent said they had ended their relationship with a UK company because of shoddy communications, over-familiarity, random emails, cold calls and poorly written letters.

¹² http://www.learningservices.org.uk/extras/brushing_up_skills.pdf

¹³ Speech by Sir Digby Jones, 8 April 2005, on Department for Education and Skills. (2005). *Skills: Getting on in business, getting on at work*.

¹⁴ Telephone interview with Roger Opie, 19 May 2005.

¹⁵ Telephone interview with Linsey Perry, 18 May 2005.

¹⁶ Telephone interview with Richard Wilson, 18 May 2005.

¹⁷ Chartered Management Institute paper. (2002). *Graduate Key Skills and Employability*, 'Recommendations', p. 4.

¹⁸ Telephone interview with Roger Opie, 19 May 2005.

Chapter 6

¹ Basic Skills Agency. (2003). *Young Children's Skills on Entry to Education*.

² Education and Skills Select Committee, UK Parliament. (2005). *Teaching Children to Read*.

³ *Times Educational Supplement*, 7 January 2005, p.1.

⁴ Telephone interview with Professor Jim McGonigal, 8 December 2004.

⁵ Speaking at the Confident Creativity Conference, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, 18 March 2005.

⁶ Letter in *The Herald*, 17 January 2002.

Notes on Contributors

The co-editors:

Stevie Davies is a novelist, literary critic, biographer and historian. She is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, and a Member of the Academi Gymreig. Her novel, *The Element of Water* (2001), was longlisted for the Booker and Orange Prizes and won the Arts Council of Wales Book of the Year prize. *The Web of Belonging* (1997) was adapted by Alan Plater as a television play, *Belonging*, shown on ITV in 2004. Her latest novel, *Kith & Kin* (Orion 2004) was longlisted for the Orange Prize and for the Academy of Wales Book of the Year. She worked for the RLF as Fellow and Advisory Fellow in Wales and South-west England. She is currently Director of Creative Writing at the University of Wales Swansea.

David Swinburne is Research Fellow at the RLF. After obtaining a degree in Chinese from Oxford University, he studied linguistics at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, where his PhD focused on clause structure and the dynamics of interpretation. He undertook further research on the interface between syntax and pragmatics at Tel Aviv University, funded by the Leverhulme Trust. Swinburne has taught English and co-ordinated a variety of academic projects. He worked for the Civil Service before joining the RLF as its second Research Fellow in 2003. In this capacity he has convened a consultative panel of core RLF partners and produced 'best practice' guidelines for new partners in the scheme. He also designed the RLF website and manages special IT projects, such as the on-line Essay Guide, and other resources for Fellows and students.

Gweno Williams is Reader in Early Modern Drama at York St John University College. Her teaching interests range from Renaissance theatre to contemporary literature. Her major research interest is early modern drama by women, particularly the plays of Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle. Williams has published articles, chapters, a co-authored monograph and a DVD on this topic. She has lectured widely and presented numerous conference papers and workshops on early drama including Shakespeare, in North America and in Europe. She spent a year as a Fulbright Exchange Teacher in Northern California. In 2002 she was awarded a National Teaching Fellowship for outstanding achievement and innovation in higher education teaching. She is Director of the new Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning at York St John – C4C: Collaborating for Creativity.

The chapter authors:

Rukhsana Ahmad's first novel, *The Hope Chest*, was published by Virago. Several of her short stories have been anthologised, some commissioned by Radio 4. She has written and adapted plays for the stage and radio, achieving distinction in both fields. Ahmad was a lecturer at the University of Karachi and has continued her commitment to education through writing residencies in various settings. She was appointed RLF Fellow at Queen Mary University of London in 2002-3 and is now an Advisory Fellow in the national network. She is currently adapting a novel for *Women's Hour* and researching a pilot drama series for the World Service Trust.

Carole Angier is the biographer of Jean Rhys and Primo Levi. She was made a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 2002. She has taught literature and philosophy at the universities of Cambridge and Sussex, the External Studies Departments of the universities of Oxford and Bristol, and the Open University (1975-1985). In 2002 Angier founded and taught *The Practice of Biography* at Warwick, which she will continue to teach at Birkbeck from 2006. For the RLF she has been Fellow and Associate Fellow at the University of Warwick, 1999-2003, and Advisory Fellow for the national scheme 2003-5. She is currently working on a book about refugees.

Helen Carey is the author of *Lavender Road*, *Some Sunny Day* and *On a Wing and a Prayer*. She also contributes to various journals and magazines and has both written and edited business games and careers literature. She has taught creative writing on courses at Bath University and for numerous other organisations. She was the RLF Fellow at University College Worcester for the academic year 2003-4. Before becoming a full-time writer she worked for Shell International and for the Careers Research Advisory Council in Cambridge where she ran management programmes for students and young managers from industry and the public sector at universities throughout the UK and Republic of Ireland. She went on to run her own management consultancy which specialised in graduate recruitment and junior management training.

Yvonne Coppard writes mainly for children and teenagers but has also written non-fiction for teachers in the areas of child protection, drama and creative writing. Before taking up writing as a full-time career, she was a secondary school teacher for some years and then an adviser to the Cambridgeshire Local Education Authority. As an author, she still visits primary and secondary schools regularly. Coppard was RLF Fellow at APU in Cambridge in 2003-4 and then Fellow at the University of Essex where she'll be continuing in post in 2005-06.

Shahrukh Husain began publishing short-stories and articles as a teenager and worked as a journalist in the UK, writing for women's magazines and broadcasting regularly for the BBC World Service. Her first book was published in 1984 and her first best-seller was *The Virago Book of Witches* (1993). She has published seventeen books including fiction and non-fiction for adults and children as well as having several screen and theatre plays commissioned. She has taught business people, MPs and diplomats going to South Asia and has been a trainer in Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy as well as occasionally teaching Creative Writing courses to adults and children. She was an RLF Fellow at London College of Fashion for two years and is now an Advisory Fellow.

Bill Kirton was a university lecturer in French, has written and performed revues at the Edinburgh Festival, written, directed and acted in stage plays in the UK and USA, and written and presented programmes on Grampian Television. He writes promotional brochures, training, environmental and safety videos, websites and other commercial materials. He has published two crime novels and has written six more, including one set in Aberdeen in 1840. His radio plays have been broadcast in the UK and in Australia and he has won a translation prize for his verse rendering of Molière's *Sganarelle*. He spent two years as an RLF Fellow at the Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen and is currently in the second year of his Fellowship at the University of Dundee.

Katharine McMahon's new novel, *The Alchemist's Daughter*, will be published by Weidenfeld and Nicolson in 2006. She is the author of four previous historical novels. McMahon has taught English and Drama in comprehensive schools and ran a creative writing course at the University of Hertfordshire. She worked as the RLF Fellow at Hertfordshire for two years. At the University of Warwick she taught the Communicating Science Course where she also coached MBA students in writing skills. McMahon conducted a study for the RLF entitled 'What's Going on with Student Writing?', and as an Advisory Fellow she has mentored fellow writers in six universities.

Nicholas Murray is the author of several literary biographies – including lives of Franz Kafka, Andrew Marvell and Matthew Arnold – as well as a collection of poems and two novels. His biography of Aldous Huxley was shortlisted for the Marsh Biography Prize in 2003. He is a regular contributor of poems, essays and reviews to newspapers and literary magazines. In 1996 he was the inaugural Gladys Krieble Delmas Fellow at the British Library Centre for the Book and he is a member of the Welsh Academy and of English PEN. He has lectured at literary festivals and universities in Britain, Europe and the United States. He is currently RLF Fellow at Queen Mary University London and is working on a book about the Victorian travellers and explorers to be published by Little, Brown.

Louise Page has worked primarily as a dramatist but has also published a novel and short stories. Her stage work includes 'Salonika' (Royal Court Theatre), 'Golden Girls' (Royal Shakespeare Company), 'When Adam was a Gardener' (Chichester Festival Theatre) and 'Hawks and Doves' (Southampton), and a play about pain called 'Kissing Better'. A great fan of radio drama, Louise has written 20 original radio plays and spent ten years as a scriptwriter on 'The Archers'. She was an RLF Fellow at Trinity & All Saints College in Leeds and is now in her second year as Fellow at Edge Hill College, Ormskirk. Her new play 'Taste' opened at the Le Preau Festival in France in November 2005 and will tour England in 2006.

William Palmer has had seven books published, and many stories, reviews and poems in journals and the national press. He reviews regularly for *Literary Review* and the *Independent*. His most recent novel is *The India House* (Jonathan Cape, 2005). In 1997, he was awarded the Society of Authors' prestigious Travelling Scholarship. For three years from 2000 he was the RLF Fellow at the University of Birmingham, then Creative Writing Project Fellow at the Birmingham and Midland Institute 2003-04 and he is now working for the RLF at the University of Warwick.

Valerie Thornton writes poems and short stories. Formerly an English teacher, she has been teaching creative writing for 20 years at all levels from primary schools to universities. She is currently writing a book on writers' craft for 11 to 14-year-olds and developing an online CPD course for teachers with SNAP (the Scottish Network for Able Pupils). She also teaches fiction writing online for the Open University and edits *New Writing Scotland*. Thornton was RLF Fellow at Glasgow University in 2001-3 and is back at the University this academic year to start a new RLF post in the Faculty of Education.

Alan Wall is a novelist and short-story writer, whose books include *Bless the Thief*, *The Lightning Cage*, *The School of Night*, *China* and *Richard Dadd in Bedlam*. In 2003 he was awarded an Arts Council/AHRB Fellowship to work with the particle physicist Gron Tudor Jones on ways of describing developments in modern physics. They recently addressed the Description and Creativity Conference in Cambridge together. Wall was an RLF Fellow at the University of Warwick and at Liverpool John Moores University. He is now Senior Lecturer in English and Creative Writing at the University of Chester.

Robin Waterfield studied Classics at Manchester University and was a research student in ancient philosophy at King's College, Cambridge. After a few years as a university lecturer, mostly at St Andrews, he joined Penguin Books as a copy-editor. He became a full-time writer a couple of years later producing many translations of classical texts, academic articles, as well as general non-fiction and children's adventure gamebooks. Waterfield has been a visiting lecturer at Williams College, Massachusetts, and has given public lectures in the UK and USA. While working as an RLF Fellow at the University of Sussex, Robin developed a series of writing skills workshops. As a Project Fellow, he delivered these workshops at South Bank University, Westminster University, Heythrop College (University of London), King's College (University of London), St Mary's College Twickenham (University of Surrey), and Middlesex University.

Shelley Weiner is an author and creative writing lecturer, whose novels include *A Sisters' Tale*, *The Last Honeymoon*, *The Joker*, and *Arnost*. Her short stories have appeared in various anthologies and on Radio 4. Shelley has chaired the judging panel for the *Jewish Quarterly* literary prizes and is training director of Words at Work, promoting good written English in the private and public sectors. Among the institutions she has taught for are the Open University, the Taliesin Trust, the British Council in Israel, and Durham University Summer School. She lectures on the creative writing programme at Birkbeck College and is currently the RLF Fellow at Middlesex University.

Appendices

Appendix 1. Student Case Studies

These samples of real consultations illustrate the range and nature of issues that students face in their writing, and how they can be addressed.

Appendix 2. An Overall Model of Provision - the University of Dundee

The University of Dundee has in place an extensive range of writing development support. Kathleen McMillan, who is Academic Skills Advisor in the Learning Enhancement Unit of the Centre for Learning and Teaching, provides an overview of the ten different services tailored to specific student requirements.

Appendix 3. Setting up a Writing Centre

Ursula Hurley set up and developed the Writing Centre at Liverpool Hope University College in her work there as Writing Centre Co-ordinator. She outlines the steps required and strategies that can be used to approach writing development.

Appendix 4. Sample Reports from RLF Fellows and Partner Institutions, Year 2004/05

Extracts from reports from Fellows and Partners from the academic year 2004/05 give a practical view of the ins and outs of providing help, based on day-to-day experiences.

Appendix 5. Pedagogical Perspectives and Recommendations for Schools

Improvement in writing skills in the longer term requires action in schools; Valerie Thornton and Yvonne Coppard consider approaches to teaching.

Appendix 6. The Effectiveness of One-to-one Writing Provision

Stevie Davies examines in detail the nature of one-to-one writing tutorials. How do they work, and why are they so effective?

Appendix 1

Student Case Studies

The following are examples of actual student consultations taken from Fellows working in a wide variety of institutions.

1.i. 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.

1.ii. 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.

1.iii. 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.

2 First-year Business Studies student F has brought a copy of a coursework assignment: an evaluation of a number of group presentations. She has little confidence in her writing in general and was disappointed with the grade awarded this piece of work. She would like feedback on some of the possible reasons for her low mark. Reading the assignment, I can see that it is well structured and answers the question adequately. F has set out the background to the presentations in her introduction, explained her criteria for evaluation, evaluated and marked each group according to those criteria and has provided an overview of the contest as a whole. F has probably lost marks through poor spelling, convoluted syntax, repetitiveness, inconsistent acknowledgement of sources and the occasional simplistic turn of phrase.

I congratulate her on the way she has planned her work and tell her that this is exactly the kind of effective structuring her tutors are looking for. Then I ask her whether she redrafts her assignments and when she confesses that she doesn't, I encourage her to do so. I suggest that she begins by reading aloud her assignment and as she does so, she comments at various points: 'That doesn't make sense...', 'Oops, I already said that...', 'Oh, that sounds a bit naff...' and so on. I tell her that redrafting and editing don't necessarily mean poring over the printed page for hours on end – it can be just as effective to read her work aloud and write herself notes in the margin to help isolate what needs to be improved or otherwise changed. She obviously has a good editorial instinct, which she would benefit from giving herself the chance to exercise.

Looking at five or six key sentences in her work which are particularly syntactically challenging, I discuss with her how she might express the content of each sentence more clearly and directly, reassuring her that academic writing needn't be full of subordinate clauses and passive verbs. She says that her insecurity about her academic writing has probably led her to write in a style which she finds unnatural. I say that this can often happen, and suggest she might want to ask her tutor for one or two examples of what s/he considers to be good academic writing in the field. The session concludes with a brief discussion on how to acknowledge sources and draw up a bibliography, I refer her to appropriate section in the RLF online writing tutorial, and say that I would be happy to see her again next year if she feels that she has further assignments she wishes to discuss.

3. Third year Film student L has emailed and the tone of her email is one of panic. She has to submit her film script to the department and it has been suggested to her that she requests a meeting with the Writing Fellow. On reading a draft of her assignment, I can see that her dialogue is quite vibrant but her inability to spell is apparent. So too, is her inability to write Welsh in a formal way when that is required in the course work. When we meet, I understand fully the difficulties she is facing. Born and brought up a Welsh language speaker, her education until 11 was at a local Welsh-language primary school which meant that her immersion in Welsh was thorough. However, she was sent away to a private/boarding school at the age of 11 and from that time onwards had no contact with Welsh in any academic function, though she continued of course to speak and use Welsh at home to family members during the holidays.

At university, she decided to follow the film course through the medium of Welsh which meant that all her assignments were to be written through the medium of the language. This, even though her written Welsh was far from acceptable. We have held sessions to do with 'correct Welsh' but there is a need perhaps to offer this earlier in the year to all departments.

I spent many hours trying to help her identify words that were similar in sound but very different in spelling. Eventually we made a checklist of words that she would be required to use on a regular basis. I also encouraged her to devise her own dictionary – a pocket copy book, as she would be able to access this easily at the time of writing assignments.

I would indeed, have liked to have seen her earlier during her time at here rather than in the latter part of the year but I appreciated her willingness to learn and to face her difficulties with grace.

One wonders how many students there are at college who face similar situations to L.

The reverse is also true, of course, of students who come from English speaking homes and yet their whole education has been through the medium of Welsh. They too might need extra support in the bilingual dilemma that could arise.

This has reminded me, in the sessions I carried out with L, of the need to channel students early on in the first semester if possible, so that one is able to timetable adequately individual sessions during the year.

4. JS is a Portuguese student of 26 with several years of experience in Civil Engineering. He is, however, lacking in confidence in his writing skills, especially since he is writing his dissertation in a foreign language. He came to me with a brief but detailed abstract of his thesis proposal, as well as some examples of his writing, and was unsure how to proceed in terms of structure and style, particularly the latter. We discussed his problems in both areas. He has since come to see me with draft sections and chapters, and we discuss clarity, presentation and points of style, and idiomatic usage with which he is unfamiliar. He understands, however, very clearly that the Writing Fellow is neither an English teacher nor an editor; he is interested in the way sentences function, why certain phrases and expressions don't work well in academic writing, and in the way Portuguese and English usage differs. He is also concerned with the overall presentation of his dissertation. He brings in short discrete sections for discussion, and studies the points I make carefully, applying them to the

work he does on his own. One of his main requirements is the acquisition of a degree of confidence and fluency of expression and style.

5. Student B is a distance learner working on an MA in European Law. B is attempting to juggle her studies with the demands of work and family. She feels isolated from the rest of the student community – though has links via email with other distance learners – and also from the University and her supervisor. This isolation, and lack of others with whom she can discuss her research and how to approach and structure her work, has left her depressed and anxious. Although her work is seen as being of a high standard and she undoubtedly works very hard, her supervisor has commented that she tends to narrate rather than analyse. Although she knows what he means, she can not see where, in her own work, this is happening.

A section of work was sent to me ahead of time, together with student B's concerns. During the tutorial I was able to point out several sections where the narrative overtook the analysis and we discussed how to rectify this – essentially, I got her to 'teach' me about the various elements in question.

Her second problem was that she tended to read everything, whether it was directly relevant or not to the essay she was working on. We spent some time analyzing key words, defining the central argument, creating lists of headings, sub headings and key words, ordering these and then isolating which primary sources were of most relevance and which secondary sources will support her central argument and which would offer critical comparison.

What was most relevant, I felt, was that we did nothing new; B knew all of this and knew how to achieve the required end. What she needed was an opportunity to clarify her ideas and to go back to basics – structure, what to read, how best to make notes, etc. – without feeling stupid, immature, incapable (her words).

Later, she emailed to say that her supervisor had been impressed when she was able to tell him at the meeting that she understood what he meant and that 'this' was how she planned to resolve it.

She has kept in touch since.

6.i. M is a final-year International Relations student, who brings to our first session (in the last week of the spring term) a full draft of a 5000 word dissertation. The draft, which she has emailed to me one week before our meeting, is so incoherent that it's often difficult to discern what argument is being furthered, and her sentences are so garbled as to be incomprehensible at times. Before tackling the weaknesses of her prose, it's necessary to clarify the central proposition of her paper and to find a way of imposing an overall structure on the piece.

Accordingly, I begin the first session by asking her to tell in a sentence or two, without consulting the dissertation, the essential point she wishes to make in it. This she does, with somewhat greater transparency than in her writing. I then ask her to summarise for me the principal pieces of evidence on which she bases her overriding argument. This too she does quite concisely and lucidly. We construct a plan of the dissertation as she has described it, and only then do we turn to the piece of writing she's handed in. Using a highlighter pen, we identify the paragraphs in which each of her major points is being made, and from this exercise it becomes apparent that the draft does not follow the outline at which we're arrived through discussion. We then mark on the hard copy blocks of text that might be transposed, and identify places where new bridging material is required.

M emails a substantially revised draft to me at the start of the summer term. This version is far more persuasive than its precursor, but individual sentences still require a lot of attention. Before our second meeting I highlight various opaque episodes in the dissertation. During our session I read these aloud to her, and ask her to paraphrase them for me. As before, her paraphrases are invariably preferable to her rather long-winded and jargon-clogged writing, and we use her own spoken words as a basis for a detailed redrafting. At the end of this session (which, like the first, has lasted around eighty minutes), we both feel that the dissertation has been greatly improved.

6.ii. J is a first-year English Literature student, who brings a 1000-word essay that she feels is 'total rubbish'. It becomes apparent at the start of our meeting that her self-confidence is so low that she is on the brink of leaving the university.

The essay is certainly weak – so weak that a complete rewrite is required – but it's easy enough to identify a couple of promising ideas buried within the text, and to suggest ways in which she might build upon them. The chief flaw of the essay is that the title explicitly requires the student to give a personal account of the ways in which an introduction to psychoanalytic theory has changed the ways he or she reads literature. Instead of answering the question, J has stitched together half a dozen very brief summaries of various essays she has read on the subject of fiction and psychoanalysis. The position taken in some of these essays is in contradiction to the position taken in others, so I begin the session with J by asking her with which of these various arguments she would be inclined to agree. I emphasise that her tutor is not expecting a definitive scholarly declaration on the question of literature and Freud: she is being asked to submit a personal and necessarily provisional statement. She should, furthermore, not concern herself with being 'literary' at this stage of her

career: independence of thought and clarity of expression should be her priorities. Within a few minutes J is very much more at ease, and soon is talking easily and fluently, and refining her ideas as she speaks. Towards the end of the hour I point out to her that a transcript of her contribution to our discussion would stretch to considerably more than one thousand words, and that she is now in the position of having to edit her thoughts to fit the length of the essay, rather than having to rely on the writings of others in order to amass the necessary word-count. I suggest that before embarking on her next essay, she should – as a preliminary to constructing a plan – set aside an hour for jotting down whatever ideas she may have on the subject, rather than rushing to the library to immerse herself in secondary texts.

J was still at the university at the end of the year.

7. Student M brings an essay about female employment in the 19th Century. M has 2 young children and holds down a part-time job as a youth worker in addition to her studies. Her tutor referred her to me. The tutor tells me that M is enthusiastic and articulate in class. However, her written work is difficult to decipher. Most of her sentences read like gobbledegook. At our first session, we work through two or three pages, sentence by sentence. I ask her to explain what she meant to say. I write down her explanations, then read them back to her. They make a lot more sense. M clearly has a good grasp of the topic. On further questioning, M reveals that she has been using the thesaurus in an attempt to sound more impressive.

In subsequent sessions, I encourage M to use language she understands and feels comfortable with. Clarity should come first. I reassure her that she will pick up the academic 'jargon' as her studies progress. A few weeks later, M brings her next essay. She has taken my advice on board. This time, she tells me she read her draft aloud to check that it made sense. I am amazed at the transformation. We work through the second essay in a fraction of the time. As she is leaving, she tells me that she feels much more confident about writing essays now. Later, she emails to let me know she gained a good B for the second essay.

8.i. Three sessions working with R on essay about health benefits of physical education. R is a part time post graduate student who said in the first session that he had never been confident about writing essays and was anxious about having to write one on the health benefits of physical education. As he said he finds it easiest to learn from written material, I gave him a copy of the literature department's guide to essay writing. We spent most of the first session brainstorming the topic (which was interesting – something I know nothing about) and making a spider map.

In the second session we worked some more on ideas for the essay and drew up a plan together. As with a lot of students, the whole idea of an introduction, with logical steps leading to the conclusion, seemed to be virgin territory, and he was amazed by the end result – a clear, logical structure on which to base his essay. A month later he returned for a third session with the almost-finished essay. He has a great writing style and most of the essay read really well. A few final tweaks and a lot of encouragement were all that was needed.

8.ii. Student N brings part of an essay on race and slavery. N was understandably concerned about her essay, which had no introduction, poor punctuation and which consisted almost entirely of regurgitated and partially understood chunks of text. She is finding it difficult to adapt to an academic way of writing and is also daunted by the need to think and write about abstract subjects. I get her to read a paragraph out loud and she discovers at once that the sentences don't work. I ask, 'What are you really trying to say?' She thinks for a bit, then says, 'What I mean is ...' and tells me in a single, lucid sentence. I suggest she writes down exactly what she has just told me and, lo and behold, we have the beginnings of a clear, straightforward argument. We repeat this process several times and I suggest she does this for herself and write the essay that way, deleting the 'what-I-means' as she goes along. We rough out an essay plan. A subsequent session is devoted to tidying up, with a quick lesson on the uses and abuses of the comma and some more reading out loud. I hope the intense work she has done on this one essay will impact on her writing in future.

9. Student A is writing a postgraduate dissertation on citizenship and people with learning disabilities for the Social Work Department. She's highly articulate, has an impressive vocabulary, inside and outside her subject, and clearly cares about the issues she's investigating. There are, however, problems with her writing and, on her first visit, she said she thought she might be dyslexic and had arranged to be tested. (In fact, it was someone in the disability services who recommended that she come and see me). She said that she feels physically sick when she has to write something. She was also confused by how the most recent paper she'd submitted had been marked. One marker had passed her, another had failed her. When I looked at samples of her work, there were obvious flaws. The two most frequent ones were a failure to check subject/verb agreements and a general carelessness in checking what she'd written. When I focused her attention on misspelled or missing words, she still read the sentence as she'd intended to write it, rather than as it was on the page (which seemed to support the idea that she was dyslexic). Examples are "word", which she read as

1. Student Case Studies

“world” and “boarder” read as “broader”, and there were many others. When I forced her to slow down and read more attentively, she saw immediately what was happening and corrected herself. By the second visit, the test had shown that she wasn’t dyslexic. She’d also bought a grammar book and was keen to improve her writing and conquer her fear of it. She’s very intelligent but she was never taught grammar. She speaks fast and well, but with many grammatical mistakes (“I’ve took”, “they’ve wrote”, etc.). She is working hard at these problems and my input was to give her some basic grammar points, direct her to the writing pages on the university intranet, the RLF and Purdue websites and try to change the way she works. She reads quickly and carelessly so I suggested mechanical strategies to slow her down, such as holding a sheet of paper under the line she is reading to prevent her eyes leaping ahead and to get her to focus on the actual words on the page rather than on what she anticipates will be there. As with many of my other students, it’s a pity she didn’t come to me much earlier in the process.

Appendix 2

An Overall Model of Provision

Learning Support provision across the University of Dundee

Compiled by Kathleen McMillan, Academic Skills Advisor, Learning Enhancement Unit

Provision	Provided by	Target groups	Mode of delivery	Staffing/Numbers	Financed by	Features
P@SS: Personal Academic Student Skills Module	Learning Enhancement Unit (LEU) for Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences	Year 1 + 2 students who are weak in study and organisational skills; those who have re-entered after academic failure in a previous year; those who need SCOTCATS to advance to next level of study	30 x 1 hour workshops supported by Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) website providing assessed activities	4 part-time staff. One seconded for necessary hours from another unit; one on 0.5 of contract; 2 hourly-paid staff + course co-ordinator at lecturer level to oversee conduct and pedagogy of course	Credit transfer of FTEs (full-time equivalents) from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences to the Centre for Learning and Teaching which is the umbrella for LEU	20 points within the Scottish Qualifications Framework i.e. 20 SCOTCATS
Writing by Appointment	Learning Enhancement Unit	Any undergraduate student in any year who has difficulties with researching, writing or structuring text for assessed assignments	1 x one-hour session with possibility for follow-up as appropriate to the individual	Team of 12 hourly paid tutors who work on an on-call basis. Ranges from local people who are themselves graduates to retired academics and business professionals with appropriate writing skills Minimal training given but provided with a resources 'kit' of materials and access to Advance@Dundee (see below) One secretary: vital for administration of appointments, finding and allocation of accommodation.	Income from P@SS above supports the programme	Responds to students' needs – often within 24-hours of request. Non-judgemental Picks up on weaknesses at an early stage and provides insights into how to go about writing at the higher levels required at university Students can have additional tutorials – within reason; all the time being encouraged to embrace concepts of critical thinking/writing and developing their autonomy as university learners
Just Write	LEU with the Royal Literary Fund	Final year undergraduate and postgraduate students	One-to-one tutorials	1 x RLF fellow on the basis of two working days in the university per week	Royal Literary Fund	A splendid development that has allowed us to target two groups that have been under-resourced in the past i.e. final year dissertation writers and postgraduate students (Masters and doctoral)

Provision	Provided by	Target groups	Mode of delivery	Staffing/Numbers	Financed by	Features
Advance@Dundee	Learning Enhancement Unit	Any student or staff member from the University of Dundee	On-line 24/7 Password access from beyond university	Authored and edited by Director of LEU and the Academic Skills Advisor with some work commissioned from specialists in specific areas	University of Dundee	Addresses needs and skills of undergraduate students. Written by academics. Won Honorary Graduates Award for Innovative Teaching 2001. 300+ articles; 2000 hits a month
Advance@Dundee Postgraduate Portal	Learning Enhancement Unit	Any student or staff member from the University of Dundee	On-line 24/7 Password access from beyond university	Authored and edited by Director of LEU and the Academic Skills Advisor with some work commissioned from specialists in specific areas	University of Dundee	Addresses needs and skills of postgraduate students. Written by academics. 100 articles (statistics not available). Routinely referred to as a reference source in course handbook/material
Preparatory Resit Exam Programme (PREP)	Learning Enhancement Unit	Any student from the University of Dundee who has to resit examinations	Series of workshops and tutorials run by academics from the LEU and from subject departments	2 x lecturers for delivery of 5 x generic learning/writing/ skills input plus 50 subject tutorials	University of Dundee with £25.00 fee from student	58.2% pass-rate for PREP students compared to 49% for non-PREP students. Positive impact reported as follow-on from the PREP experience
P@SS for ACCESS; P@SS for ASPIRE; Preparatory courses for part-time students	Learning Enhancement Unit	Students who enter the University under widening access provision	Summer School (3-week input); ASPIRE (2-week input); Weekend half-day courses	2-4 hourly paid lecturers	University of Dundee	Meets the needs of groups with potentially weak learning histories and provides intensive input before admission to university
EFL support in Writing: English for Academic Purposes	School of Applied Linguistic and Language Studies	All international students for whom English is not a first language. This includes students who have come to Scotland specifically to develop their English language skills preparatory to admission to Higher Education in the UK	Functional classes on: Speaking Listening Reading Writing All for academic purposes (No dedicated provision to support students on a one-to-one basis)	2 permanent staff and miscellaneous hourly paid EFL teachers	Departments have to pay a capitation fee if students apply and are accepted for this teaching (the students are tested and gain a place if their language falls below a certain level – roughly below IELTS 6.0)	First thing to go when the pressure builds; students prefer to spend the time on subject specific writing rather than addressing the root cause of their difficulties, i.e. weakness in English language. Classes can be perceived as insufficiently focussed on needs of the individual and their subject of study – too slow

Provision	Provided by	Target groups	Mode of delivery	Staffing/Numbers	Financed by	Features
Support for Disabilities including dyslexia	Disability Centre	Any student	Ad hoc – assessment amounts to provision of mode of support deemed appropriate. E.g. weakest dyslexic students may be given computer, voice synthesiser software; others may be given one-to-one support including proof-reading support		University overall. Some students (non-Scots) may receive funding from Local Education Authority and they, themselves, are able to 'buy' support from within the university	Not all students wish to acknowledge their dyslexia/disability and may, therefore, prefer one of the other forms of provision
Write Online	Learning Enhancement Unit	Students on Summer Access Course who have been identified as demonstrating weaknesses in writing skills (+/- 25)	Within Summer School timetable, 5-week input. One tutor led meeting per week; remainder via dedicated Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) module	1 part-time tutor	University of Dundee	On-line activities introducing key issues of grammar followed up by interactive practice exercises. Follow-up tasks provided in VLE

Appendix 3

Setting up a Writing Centre

The following paper was presented at the Writing Development in Higher Education (WDHE) Conference, 2004, and published in the Proceedings. It is reproduced here by kind permission of the author.

The Story so Far – Setting up a Writing Centre at Liverpool Hope

Ursula Hurley

Abstract

This paper describes a new initiative and relates progress to date, with a secondary focus on evaluation and how this may inform future development. The Writing Centre began its work in August 2003 following a successful bid to HEFCE's Learning and Teaching Strategy allocation. Issues raised include pedagogical principles and equitable delivery methods. While research indicates that for many UK HEIs work to support academic writing is going on within disciplines, there seem to be few initiatives that stand alone as a cross-disciplinary writing resource. Particular reference will be made, therefore, to Washington University, St Louis.

Introduction

Liverpool Hope's mission statement includes a pledge 'to provide high quality courses for...those who would otherwise not have the chance to enter higher education' (Liverpool Hope, 2004). The institution has enjoyed considerable success in achieving this aim, with over 28% of students coming from postcodes with a traditionally low rate for participation in higher education. This proportion is the highest in the North West and above the expected benchmark for such an institution. Once students recruited from non-traditional backgrounds arrive at Hope it is vital, both ethically and practically, to recognise that they may not have the skills that undergraduates are often assumed to possess. Effective, appropriate support is therefore a priority (Liverpool Hope, 2002).

Accordingly, the institution has elected to use its entire Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) Learning and Teaching Strategy allocation for the period 2003 – 2005 to enhance student literacy, reflecting the perception that under-developed written communication skills are a major obstacle to student success, and in some cases, retention.

Defining a Writing Centre

So what is a Writing Centre and what does it do? Although the Writing Centre movement has been developing for over 30 years in the United States, Writing Centres in the UK are a relatively new concept, and the idea has caused some confusion among students and staff alike. Multiple misconceptions have resulted in the following sign being displayed on the Writing Centre door:

- We are not a proof-reading service.
- We do not do typing lessons.
- We do not write essays to order.
- We do not use red pens.
- We do not offer a quick-fix.

So, we know what a Writing Centre is not. Can we be a little more positive and say what it is or might be? When I came into post in August 2003 I was asked to create a Centre that fulfilled the following aims:

1. To celebrate writing across the institution
2. To enhance academic and creative writing at all levels
3. To offer supplementary support to students

There are few cross-disciplinary Writing Centres in UK universities at the moment, and even fewer that seek to combine creative and expository writing. It was therefore necessary to look to the United States for a model upon which we might base Hope's Writing Centre.

The Writing Center at Washington University, St Louis, is one of the only U.S. centers to combine expository and creative writing strengths. It is keen to promote "crossover work", which involves a free flow of ideas and techniques between the traditionally separate fields of 'academic' and 'creative' writing. What is also attractive about this Center as a model is its underlying philosophy:

Our tutors will not edit or proofread student papers. Instead, they will identify errors . . . and make some model corrections, leaving the student responsible for correcting any remaining errors. (The Writing Centre at Washington University in St Louis, 2004)

This model of the student as active learner rather than passive recipient of 'correct' writing is one that Hope's Writing Centre seeks to emulate.

First Steps

In the first seven months of the Writing Centre's operation, the overwhelming demand has been for supplementary support with academic writing. A pilot scheme was initiated, offering a series of 5 drop-in workshops:

1. Introduction to academic writing
2. How to write an essay
3. How to use references and avoid plagiarism
4. Improve your writing skills
5. Writing for exams

From October to December 2003, the centre ran 40 sessions to a total of 800 students on 4 Hope sites. These workshops are still being requested, and as a result of feedback from students, several more workshops have been developed:

- How to write analytically
- Dissertations
- How to read academic texts
- Introduction to legal writing
- How to write reflectively

All these workshops can be offered generically as drop-in sessions outside teaching time, or they can be tailored to particular subjects or groups of students, and delivered within teaching time by request. The greatest

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demand from students has been for generic workshops outside of formal teaching time. There is an ideological issue here between the provision of generic writing skills support and the development of writing within the disciplines that will need to be considered as the centre evolves. Student enthusiasm for these workshops may demonstrate that students themselves are all too aware that they need these skills in order to succeed, but have not known how or where to acquire them up until this point. Whether we are providing access to these skills in the most effective or appropriate way is of course an ongoing debate.

Each workshop session finishes with a request for students to complete an evaluation questionnaire. While a detailed analysis of the data collected is still underway, it is evident that the vast majority of students rated the sessions as 'very useful' or 'quite useful'. Qualitative feedback included these comments:

- 'Thanks for a very useful session. Just starting an essay, with more confidence'.
- 'So far, very good'.
- 'I found the workshop extremely helpful and informative'.
- 'I enjoyed the workshop and found it easy to follow'.
- 'I have been attending the workshops and they have been brilliant'.
- 'I believe that everybody is enjoying the sessions and learning a lot'.

Workshop sessions are developed in the classroom as a direct response to expressed student need. They are continually refined and adjusted as a result of feedback from students and staff. This may be why students have responded so positively to them. As always, the challenge is how to capture the effect of the Writing Centre on student attainment in a meaningful, academically valid way. Various options are currently being explored, including case studies, and comparison of the performance of cohorts of students who have received Writing Centre tuition with those who have not.

The Writing Centre also offers one-to-one appointments where students can receive individual help and guidance. This service is becoming increasingly popular, with students recommending the Writing Centre to each other. In the first semester, 81 appointments were delivered, totalling 52 hours' contact time.

Student Issues

Detailed records of each consultation are kept, and again, while a detailed analysis is still underway, the data collected so far gives a broad picture of the recurring issues that students face. One of the most popular reasons for a Writing Centre consultation is cited as uncertainty over what academic writing is. Many students describe it as 'a whole new language'. They feel unsure as to what is expected of them, likening the process to one of 'trial and error' where there are no clear ground rules. Often the major difficulty is not students' understanding of their subject, but being able to translate that understanding into formal language. Lack of confidence and fear of failure are also factors that hold students back. One student commented that 'it was not so much that I didn't know where the goal posts were, rather that I wasn't even in the right stadium.'

The process of essay writing also causes a great deal of anxiety. Many students report uncertainty over how to address the question. There seems to be general confusion as to what it is their tutors actually want from them. Writing critically and constructing an argument are both major difficulties for many students. Indeed, the whole concept of critical thinking is often completely new and strange, with the tendency being to dump information without organising it into a coherent train of thought. Introductions and conclusions are strange places that seem to call for generalisation and repetition, while under-developed research techniques result in a complete lack of citation, or so much inappropriate material that the point gets lost.

The use of references is a major cause of confusion and hostility. The first barrier is an ideological resistance to the principles and reasons for citation, closely followed by uncertainty as to what constitutes plagiarism, particularly where the internet is concerned. This is compounded by alleged inconsistency from markers, which causes a great deal of ill feeling, particularly where marks can be lost for poor referencing.

In addition to the difficulties described above, many students attending the Writing Centre display an alarming lack of basic literacy. Many claim never to have encountered grammar or punctuation before. Apart from the usual problems, such as the use of the apostrophe, and the appropriate spelling of 'were' or 'where', sentence structure seems to be a significant difficulty, even for students who are otherwise relatively articulate. The challenge for the Writing Centre is to enable students with basic literacy problems to progress quickly, without having to wait for long-term remedial work to take effect. One of the most disturbing features of this phenomenon is the large minority of students who see writing skills as an extra hassle on top of everything else, rather than as being integral to the thinking and learning process.

Predictably, the mention of the word 'exam' brings about panic and horror in most students. They report the same issues as above, compounded by time pressures. Many students seem to be passive revisers, who concentrate on recalling facts rather than thinking actively about how they might be used to construct an exam answer. There is also widespread resistance to the idea of practising exam answers, backed up by the belief that if you learn enough facts, they will somehow form themselves into a coherent answer by the time a ticking clock and adrenalin are introduced.

Developing Strategies and Techniques

Given that these are the issues that students present with, what strategies can be used to address them? The first step in this process is to draw out the positives in students' work and highlight what they are doing well, however sparse these characteristics may be. This approach enhances students' confidence and motivation, and provides a firm foundation from which to work on improving competence. Confidence is important, particularly for mature students. Several have commented that sessions with the Writing Centre have given them the confidence to just 'go for it': often they are so anxious about doing it wrong or making themselves look foolish that they develop stress-induced writer's block. One student, who has been a regular client since last October, commented recently: 'I don't think you understand. It's not just my writing you have fixed, you have rebuilt me.'

The next stage is to make clear to students exactly what is expected of them when writing at University level. Often, once students understand why they are being asked to write, and the criteria against which they are being assessed, renewed focus and motivation follow. Once the big picture is clearly understood, some students 'take off' and feel that they no longer need the Centre's support. Other students require specific assistance with the mechanics of writing, such as sentence structure, spelling and punctuation. This is usually provided via individual consultations, where students are asked to evaluate their own work critically. Most students prove to be surprisingly accurate in identifying precisely where they could improve. Once areas for improvement have been identified, a 'prescription' is issued, which consists of exercises, points to bear in mind, and a 'checklist' to work through before handing in their next piece of written work. Most students seem to be very enthusiastic in adhering to these prescriptions, perhaps because they help to formulate them. Students are encouraged to make repeat appointments throughout the semester so that they can be supported and their progress monitored. Many students and their tutors have reported dramatic improvements in their academic achievement since receiving assistance in this way.

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The following techniques have been extensively road-tested at the Writing Centre, and seem to work effectively with most students. One strategy is to make clear the processes underlying academic writing by taking it out of context, and removing the 'formality' that can be a distraction. For example:

1. 'Your reader is an alien' works on the principle that one cannot assume that the reader knows anything. Imagining that one's reader knows nothing can encourage a more rigorous approach to explaining concepts and unpacking ideas, rather than assuming 'my tutor knows all this anyway, so why should I bother?' Students are often surprised to be informed that the whole point of an essay is for them to show their tutors what they have learned.
2. 'Using margarine' refers to the connecting words and signposting phrases that hold an essay together. If the facts and figures are the sandwich filling, the margarine is the essential, if bland, ingredient that makes it all stick together. These are phrases such as 'in the light of the above evidence, it could be argued that...'
3. 'Feel the fear and do it anyway' refers to the terror of failure that can hold students back. Giving students permission to experiment, and get it wrong at times, can be liberating for those who are so concerned with grades and percentages that they lose sight of their own learning process.

All the techniques mentioned above are ways of defamiliarising academic writing, removing the accompanying negative context and allowing the underlying processes to be seen in a different light. One student commented: 'there is nothing "academic" about our conversations. If you were trying to teach me academic writing by disguising it, I have swallowed it hook, line and sinker.'

Incorporating Creativity

Students often see academic writing as formal, strict and boring: a burdensome task that has to be performed to a certain level of proficiency in order to gain their degree, but ultimately something that they do not enjoy. To counteract this perception, the Writing Centre seeks to introduce an element of creativity into the teaching and practice of academic writing. The types of creativity that the Centre aims to promote include: generating originality, making innovative use of materials, finding a new angle, and adopting the practices of 'creative writing' as tools for generating academic writing. We aim to foster a sense of possibility, play and enjoyment within the framework of 'academic' writing forms.

The Centre has developed a series of writing workshops that aims to show students how their creativity can be productively applied to academic writing tasks. Underpinning these workshop sessions is the assertion that forms of writing usually perceived as 'academic' (essays, reports, literature reviews, and dissertations, for example) are a part of the same continuum as traditionally 'creative' forms such as screenplays, novels, letters and diaries.

The first session begins by asking students about the kind of writing they did as children, and the kind of writing that they most enjoyed doing as a child. Usually the response is 'writing stories'. Invariably the childhood writing tasks they mention will involve some element of creativity, whether they are 'what I did at the weekend' or 'if I was Prime Minister'.

Most students report positive experiences of this kind of writing task. As a group, we then try to define what it was that made writing in this way so enjoyable. Responses usually include: 'freedom of expression', 'rewarded

for being creative', 'not restricted by rules and conventions about what is or is not acceptable within that genre', and 'wrote because I wanted to'. Students are asked to contrast these responses with their perceptions of academic writing tasks. Student perceptions of academic writing are: 'too formal', 'stuffy', 'not sure why I'm writing', 'no clear motivation', 'you just have to do it', 'restrictive', 'boring' and so on.

We go on to examine how and why that sense of creativity has been lost. Students are asked to think of a favourite novel, and answer the following questions:

- Why do you like this book?
- What is it that makes you want to read it?
- How does the author engage with the reader?
- How is the book structured?
- How is the language used?
- What was the author's motivation for writing?

Students are then asked to think of themselves as authors of academic texts. Firstly, they are asked: 'what is your motivation for writing?' The first round of responses is usually negative (see above), but with some coaxing we reach a discussion about their general motivation for learning and studying at this level. The use of creativity as a tool in the active learner's kit is then discussed, and the concept of applying 'creative writing' techniques to academic texts is introduced. A tutor-led analysis of the novelist's techniques (structure, transparency, coherence, etc.) and how they can be applied to academic writing follows.

Further workshop sessions cover common academic forms and frequently encountered problems. The possibility to extend the 'academic as creative writing' paradigm is almost infinite, and can be tailored to demonstrate practical solutions to most student writing issues. For example, the use and purpose of paragraphs can be explained by reference to any popular television series that contains commercial breaks. Students are asked to consider the material that occupies the space between commercial breaks. Their observations are guided towards the following characteristics: something must happen to keep the viewer's interest, it must link with what has happened previously and what will happen next, it must also be a discrete unit of material that has its own internal logic. Students are asked to apply these principles to the use of paragraphs.

A further example is the use of the introduction in an essay. Students are asked to think of their favourite film and what happens in the first five or ten minutes. They note that the viewer gets a good idea of what sort of film they are watching (horror, comedy, romance), the important characters are introduced, and the main 'hook' or narrative device is presented so that the viewer's interest is captured and maintained. By this point, students are often able to make their own transition to the application of these principles to their own academic writing.

In tandem with these workshops, students are encouraged to read creative texts, and to attempt their own creative writing, noting strategies and practising techniques as they do so. Techniques usually reserved for the 'creative writing' course, such as dealing with writer's block and generating ideas are also explored.

There are several techniques for dealing with writer's block. One that copywriters use is to write a ridiculous, fantastical fairy story about the subject in hand, however dry it may be. Although the story itself usually cannot be used, the space to think that it creates often leads one to find a new angle or a different perspective on something. Another strategy is to take the pressure off by creating a 'Word' document entitled 'rubbish' (or worse!) and just typing in ideas and musings, however tentative. Thinking and writing are intimately connected (Fairbairn & Winch, 1991), and often the process of writing will generate ideas. Sometimes, a few lines in, the

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'rubbish' will actually start to become very useable material. This is the electronic equivalent of taking your pencil for a walk.

Qualitative evaluation has produced comments such as: 'everything seems so much easier when you look at it like this', 'now I feel clear about what is expected of me', 'now I enjoy writing'. Some students also report enhanced grades, but this has yet to be audited quantitatively. One or two students fail to see the point, but this seems to be related to their own perceptions about what creativity is and where it is 'permitted'.

In conclusion, conceptualising creativity as a tool in the active learner's kit reveals a whole new vista of possibilities (Learning and Teaching Support Network, 2004). Creativity becomes a catalyst, or enabler, unlocking the potential in learners who are restricted and discouraged by negative perceptions of what academic writing is. Many students seem to believe that 'creativity' is reserved for those studying performing arts or creative writing, and do not consider it a relevant factor in the learning process of someone studying, for example, psychology or history. The experiences described above illustrate how the perceived distinction between creativity and academia can be reconfigured to synthesise creative academic endeavour. The application of a creative approach to academic writing can reveal new perspectives, inform innovative pedagogical approaches and, most importantly, add value to the learning experience.

Looking Ahead

Looking to the future, the Writing Centre must seek to embed itself into curricula, championing writing within the disciplines at an institutional level. Sustainability is of course an issue, and no source of continuing funding has yet been secured beyond 2005. In the few months during which the Writing Centre has been in operation, student reaction has been immensely encouraging, and there is a genuine sense of having touched only the tip of a very large iceberg. The challenge now is to begin to work in a more strategic way, ensuring most effective use of a finite resource by making materials, techniques and support available to staff within the disciplines, so that the Centre can influence student writing in the same way that a small stone casts ripples when thrown into a large pond.

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Author

Ursula Hurley was the Writing Centre Co-ordinator at Liverpool Hope University College until 2005. She is now Lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Salford. Her research interests include: the relationship between autobiography and fiction (the death and rebirth of the author), writing in the disciplines vs writing across the curriculum, using creativity within the curriculum, and the pedagogy of writing skills development.

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Appendix 4

Sample Reports from RLF Writing Fellows and Partner Institutions, Year 2004/05

A Fellow's Report to Staff

Thanks are due to the English Department for providing me with a teaching experience that has been productive and pleasing. I enjoyed being part of such a dynamic department. I appreciated the welcome that came from colleagues. Most of all, I was delighted to have the opportunity to work with lively and interesting students.

The RLF Scheme

The experience, for me, fully confirmed the worth of the Royal Literary Fund Writing Fellowship Scheme. For many students, the one-to-one consultations seemed to offer a haven where they could air uncertainties that they didn't dare admit in front of their tutors or fellow students. Some of the most powerful examples of this came near the beginning of the year, when several undergraduates brought me details of assignments and said: 'I have no idea what he (or she) is talking about.' The assignment was in most cases perfectly intelligible, and after only a few minutes' discussion students realised this. Their initial anxieties were paralysing; once they had dealt with them in a safe setting, they felt ready to launch out on their own. Students' reluctance to approach their lecturers in cases such as this is an almost inevitable consequence of the fact that lecturers are required to be assessors and enforcers of the academic rules as well as educators. The RLF Fellow is in the privileged position of being able to offer advice and guidance from outside the system, as it were.

Another strength of the Fellowship Scheme is that it allows students who need extended help to come back and back again without feeling that they are making too many demands on a lecturer who has other calls on his or her time. I emphasised that students could see me as often as they needed in order to progress; this made it possible, say, to use one tutorial to read a student's work and identify problems, a second session to work on basics like punctuation, a third to check whether they could put into practice what they'd learned, and a fourth to take up more general issues of coherence or style. Repetition and practice are important elements in acquiring a skill, and the Fellowship allowed me to spend as much individual time with students as was needed to help them develop as writers.

Good writing, and the ability to communicate effectively, is not often the object of formal instruction, and yet it is the foundation for most of the work that students do. Subtle thinking and subtle writing are inextricably linked. It intrigued me that so many students – including many of the more talented writers – failed to understand certain basics of good writing. Several had ruled out the idea of editing and redrafting; they had picked up the notion at school that good writers were the ones who scribbled a finished piece off at first go. Once they understood that all 'real' writers draft and re-draft, and that editing is crucial to well-shaped writing, they were able to do better work. Other students had never realised how important it is to articulate one's argument before setting out to write an essay. Demonstrating to students the value of deciding at an early stage 'what story you are going to tell' was more frequently helpful than any other piece of advice I had to offer.

Who I saw

I ran two essay writing workshops during the year, for students from the Public Services and the Working with Young People Foundation Degrees. The participants – nineteen students in all – seemed to benefit from the workshops, and there was positive feedback from tutors.

The rest of my teaching took the form of one to one tutorials. Over the year, I've had individual consultations with 107 different students, or five new students on average in each of the twenty-four teaching weeks. 54 of these students returned for further sessions, bringing the total of tutorials over the year to 221, or an average of nine a week.

Over three-quarters (82/107) of the students who consulted me were women, and seventy per cent (75/107) were over the age of 21. I don't know whether this approximates to the gender and age profile of students in the relevant departments, but I suspect there may be a greater willingness on the part of older students to seek help. My impression was that mature students were more likely to use the Writing Fellow as part of a self-generated strategy aimed at producing the best work they could, while students under twenty-one more often saw visits to the Writing Fellow – triggered usually by a referral from a tutor – as a means of addressing an immediate and pressing weakness.

Undergraduates in their second year were the keenest in terms of attendance; freshers kept me busy as well, especially at the beginning of the year when many needed confidence-building. I also saw 21 third year undergraduates, many of whom wanted advice about dissertations, and seven postgraduates.

Most of the undergraduates who came to see me were studying English (or English with Drama or Creative Writing, or another combination) but I also saw students from Communication Studies, Film Studies, Sociology, Social Work, Art, Business Studies / Marketing and Women's Studies.

What we did

The problems that students brought constituted an intriguing range. Many were experiencing difficulties with the process of essay writing, from interpreting the question to making a plan; some struggled with the basics of grammar and syntax, and others, with more sophisticated questions of argument and expression. Students not infrequently sought help on questions that had been dealt with in the meticulous essay writing guidelines produced by the department; I took this to mean that they often needed individual, face-to-face advice before a point would finally hit home.

Many students sought me out not because of technical problems with writing, but because lack of confidence was holding them back from doing their best. In some cases, something as simple as a careful reading of their work and an assurance that what they wrote wasn't 'stupid' was enough to free them up to concentrate on concrete improvements in technique.

It's worth saying, I think, that although one might occasionally become discouraged by contact with a student who seemed unable make much headway, RLF teaching provides, on the whole, the best experience of teaching imaginable. (I say this as a former Professor of Sociology with twenty-seven years' experience of university teaching.) It was teaching with the bad bits – lecture preparation; grading; failing students; committee meetings – left out; teaching devoted to helping students to improve the quality of their work. Bliss!

Issues most often discussed:

- What is an argument – and how is one produced?
- In what way should third year essays be superior to those produced in the second year?
- What does the essay question mean?
- What's involved in editing?
- What is a sentence?
- How to introduce an essay. How to conclude.
- How to move from notes on reading to an essay plan.
- How to start writing an essay (instead of just thinking about it).
- How to know when an argument veers off the point. How to correct it.
- Basic punctuation – use of the comma, semi-colon, colon, apostrophe.
- How to integrate quotations into the body of an essay.
- How to structure material for a dissertation.

Recommendations

Here are a handful of issues that occur to me as a result of the year's RLF teaching, and which the department might like to consider.

Reference material (departmental guidelines, dissertation guidelines, study skills handouts, etc.):

The reference material at the institution aimed at preparing students for the intellectual challenges of studying for a degree is impressive in range and quality. However, there is one further handout or reference that might usefully be produced; that is, a booklet of exemplary academic writing. I saw many students in the course of the academic year whose work suffered from heavy-handed use of theoretical apparatus and from complicated, not to say convoluted, phrasing; I worked to persuade them that clarity should be their goal and that sophistication does not require obscurity. (The problem appeared often among second and third year undergraduates who were attempting to raise their game). It seems to me that one of the reasons why students offer overly-complicated writing is because when tutors recommend reading for its intellectual content, students mistakenly assume that its stylistic achievements are being recommended as well. Hence, they take as their models of good writing the work of scholars whose contribution lies elsewhere. The antidote to this might be a booklet containing extracts that students know have been selected primarily for the lucidity and effectiveness of the writing.

Publicity: Students have many things on their minds and remembering the presence of a Writing Fellow is far from their highest priority; it is important, if the service is to be used to its fullest, to have maximum publicity – through posters, articles in student newspapers, emails and so forth – and to present students with reminders at intervals throughout the year. I am grateful to the many tutors who took a moment to refer individual students to me, or to remind their classes about the service. I believe that it would be helpful in future to put more emphasis on the Writing Fellow as a service for all students and not just those who are having particular difficulties with their essays. Anyone can improve – and some of my tutorials this year demonstrated that even the brightest of students have something to gain.

Help for staff: In the course of the year, I was consulted by a handful of tutors from various departments about their writing. It was mentioned that some might be glad to take part in a writing group for lecturers who are preparing papers for publication, with the Writing Fellow in attendance. I hadn't the time to pursue this in 2004-2005, but it may be a project for my successors to consider.

Extract from a Fellow's Commentary on her Year in Post

Most of the students who came to me for help were studying in the Literature, Film and Theatre Studies department, although there were representatives from subjects as diverse as Robotics and Politics. It was an interesting and diverting challenge to engage with such a wide variety of subjects; I learned a lot!

In the one-to-one sessions the overwhelming problems brought by students were to do with structure: how to plan, paragraph and keep to the point. Many had problems interpreting the question; there were instances where the question was too vague to pin down and the student was referred back to the lecturer, but often the student had not approached the question in a calm, logical way. With these students my approach was to go back to the basic essay structure and emphasize the importance of planning. For those who had never actually planned an essay, I offered to talk them through a typical essay question. I also checked their first drafts for flow, style and evidence of sticking to the question.

A significant number of first year students found the shift in gear from A-level to university difficult; for mature students, this was more pronounced. Some students needed tuition in fairly basic matters such as paragraphing and sentence structure before they could begin to make sense at all; many said they had it all 'in their heads' but could not put it down on paper. They needed some basic pointers on style and flow.

In general, students spoke about their courses with enthusiasm and clearly felt they were well taught and well supported in their studies. However, there were students who lacked confidence and were hesitant to seek help. They did not want to look as though they were struggling (even when they clearly were). They were convinced that it was 'obvious' they were going to fail (even when they clearly weren't). I encouraged these students to talk to their lecturers and to come and see me two or three times during their next assignment (planning stage, first and final drafts, etc.) so that I could help them to keep on track and boost their confidence where necessary.

Some students brought marked essays and asked me to interpret the comments made by staff, as the students were unable to understand what was meant. Usually the comments amounted to good, clear feedback on what was successful and what had gone wrong in the essay, so that it was easy to see the link with the final mark.

Just occasionally, however, the comments were vague (or practically non-existent) and neither the student nor I could see where the essay had fallen short of the requirements of the question. While I always encouraged students to go back to the lecturer and ask for clarification, I suspect this did not always happen.

It is a luxury to be able to offer 1:1 tuition to students, and of great advantage to the university that this can be offered with only negligible cost. The value of individual supervision was seen in the raised levels of confidence and the increase in marks. It would be interesting to conduct research that could actually show what improvements, on average, were made. For now, I have only the circumstantial evidence of the return visits by satisfied customers, who waved their 'before' and 'after' marks with great glee. Even where the rise in marks was not substantial, students said they felt they were more at ease with the demands of their courses and more confident that they would succeed. I believe this was down to the good quality of the teaching in the university; I was able to build upon that by focusing on each student as an individual.

Extract from a Fellow's Commentary on his Year in Post

It has been a rewarding first year for me as an RLF Fellow. I came across many interesting and talented students, and I was plunged into a variety of subject matter. Some days I felt like I was on an express train travelling across highly different terrains. I was also visited by students who were finding the task of writing essays difficult, or even frightening. Many students were seeking reassurance, or lacked confidence in their own judgement or writing. Others were already achieving very respectable marks but wanted to improve on these; the way they were expressing themselves or structuring their essays prevented them from reaching their potential.

My time has almost exclusively been spent on one-to-one tutorials with students, and I sensed that they enjoyed and appreciated the amount of attention that I was able to give them and their essays. The majority of students would not have felt able to raise their concerns in a more public setting. Each session generally lasted about 45 minutes, although initial ones, where students sometimes came with past essays - and to size me up - were often shorter. I only held one class/workshop, with some third year music students who were embarking on a final essay about musical theatre; the response to this workshop from the tutor and students was very positive, and the tutor is keen to invite me again, but earlier in the year next time. {...}

Many students came with a keen sense of what their problem was: for example, "odd jumps" and the linking of paragraphs. I think that developing an argument, or making their argument clear enough through the evidence

and examples that they had gathered, was a key concern for many students. The structure and argument of an essay featured over 60 times in my sessions. Sometimes students needed help reorganising their material so that their points were placed more cohesively. In tutorials we often worked on establishing the topic of a paragraph, and making sure that it wasn't a collection of scattered points. On the other hand, there were occasions when students were so eager to prove the relevance of the point they were making to the title of the essay that they were stating a phrase from the title far too often!

An issue that students were less aware of was writing too descriptively, without enough analysis. Sometimes they were describing and summarising, when the question asked them to compare and contrast, for example. Often, the simple act of telling me what their essay was all about helped them to discover the central idea for themselves. Similarly, students were sometimes unsure what to focus on when they could choose their own topic; by discussing it together, we were often able to discover exactly what it was that interested them and compose a title accordingly.

A more common problem, of which again students were often fully aware, was writing in a consistent voice which was correctly pitched for their audience. Some essays lurched between an academic tone and colloquial phrases. This whole issue is connected to vocabulary and word choice, of course, which was a frequent concern for students, as was grammar and punctuation (I have noted 55 instances of this in the boxes I tick on my student record forms).

I noticed that it was the introduction (which sometimes read as a conclusion) and the conclusion of an essay that students stumbled over quite often. Students would frequently find their stride two pages in, but the opening pages were a bumpy ride - sometimes irrelevant, regurgitating the title, making generalisations or simply dull. With conclusions, students would sometimes lob in a major and vitally interesting point which they should have introduced earlier; or write the same things as they written in their introduction.

We sometimes discussed the issue of research and sources, and rather less, citation systems and bibliography; the student handbooks are generally excellent at explaining these.

In the tutorials themselves, we frequently worked on grammar, syntax, punctuation, spelling and presentation. Gradually most students gained the confidence to identify mistakes as we read through it – reading aloud reveals so much. After I had suggested some corrections, they were often able to pick up the wand and satisfactorily change some howlers themselves. Occasionally, a rule needed to be explained to them, and practiced. The other most common activity of tutorials was to discuss and make structural changes to an existing draft. Some sessions were devoted more to the earlier stage of essay writing: generating ideas and drawing up a plan and structure of writing. {...}

I am confident that I have added to the breadth of the university's existing study skills arrangements. Several lecturers from different disciplines did inform me that their students had found their visits to me were very helpful, and I had students returning to me jubilant that they had achieved a higher mark than usual; such feedback was greatly appreciated. Another rewarding experience was to see students leave their sessions far less worried and with a sense of purpose – knowing what they had to do next. Some students mentioned that they had never thought of approaching the essay in the way we discussed, and I hope that they continue to apply this way of thinking to future essays, or work.

Extract from a Partner's Report

The scheme at our institution was perhaps more successful than ever this academic year. We were fortunate in the addition of another Fellow to the existing team of two. This meant that we could retain the wide provision of 'one-to-one' tutorials and the weekly workshops. But it also meant that we could be more flexible in playing the two forms of student contact.

Practically, we took the same approach as in previous years to advertise the Fellowship. Emails to both staff and module leaders across the university, along with in-house magazine features, were backed up by posters across campus and by information left for reference with the student union. The Fellows were usefully included in induction meetings for arriving students, who were thereby alerted to the scheme and to the presence of a Fellow across their 3 years of study. We worked hard initially to continue past links, particularly with the Student Union support services, and to work with the mature students' officer to ensure that the scheme was broadly advertised amongst that constituency.

In terms of the Fellows' profile and workload within the university this year we decided to adopt a consistent approach week to week, in order to ensure that students could 'predict' how the scheme operated and so could benefit fully. We opted for a pattern of mainly one-to-ones spread between the three Fellows each week, alongside a weekly workshop session. One Fellow offered workshops on people's own writing, which were so successful that they ran across both semesters. These workshops certainly had a knock-on effect with regard to take-up of the one-to-one sessions – people tended to follow-up on discussions from the workshops. As a result, we will adopt the same patterning of more public fora alongside the tutorials next year.

4. Sample Reports

The single major advance in institutional terms this year, one which gave the Fellowship even greater 'presence', was the decision to site the workshops in a new learning resources centre in the university library. This not only gave the Fellow and the students the benefit of newly upgraded space to work in, but had the advantage of offering the RLF scheme prominence as part of a university-wide 'resource'. My sense was that this in itself garnered additional take up for the 'one-to-ones'. It is true to say, though, that this past year has seen the tutorial side of the scheme more heavily subscribed than ever before (if not often over-subscribed). I regularly checked the booking rota, and the Fellows all had every tutorial 'slot' booked, often weeks in advance.

Extract from a Partner's Report

The RLF Fellow has been a much-valued presence again this past year. He has often been so busy it was hard to meet with him; he almost always had a student with him during his days here. His genial commitment to working closely with students on their essays and writing difficulties has become well known. This year I had some first hand experience of just how effective his intensive guidance could be. One of my students was working on a dissertation and wrote early drafts that were almost unreadable because she had very little idea how to structure an argument, she wrote incomplete or run-on sentences, and most tricky of all, she tried to give her writing force by using or more often misusing inappropriate elevated vocabulary. She seemed entirely unresponsive to my attempts to help her improve her writing, and I became convinced that she would do very badly if she even managed to submit a dissertation at all. On my recommendation she went to see the Fellow and worked with him steadily for several months, and her work gradually began to improve, so much so that in the end she achieved an impressive high upper second. I suspect that there were many similar cases over the year. The Fellow's meticulous care in reading student writing and then offering detailed advice about everything from grammar to the widest aims of the work, continues to impress me.

{...} I am often struck by how vital this work is and yet how invisible it can seem compared to the official curriculum teaching. I won't say it is unsung because many colleagues throughout the university have come to realise how important this work of the RLF Fellow has been, but of its very nature — confidential, one-to-one, and to a large extent an internal process of the development of writing skill — this work happens behind the scenes. Students really value the confidentiality and can be reluctant to admitting that they have been to consult the RLF Fellow, so we don't always know that the improvements we see in a specific case are a direct result of his efforts, although we are very aware of an overall improvement, and of course sometimes the students call attention to the changes themselves. {...}

We are extremely grateful to the Royal Literary Fund for the provision of a Writing Fellow. For the first time in many years questions about how to write and how to raise standards of writing are fully out in the open. The Fellow's contribution to the support of students as writers is having a significant influence on students, and also on the way we think about writing as a part of curricula and modes of assessment. We very much hope that this excellent scheme will be able to continue in the future.

Appendix 5

Pedagogical Perspectives and Recommendations for Schools

Valerie Thornton and Yvonne Coppard

There has been a bewildering variety of changes within the school education system over the last two decades and more. Teachers feel embattled, and disinclined to trust each 'new initiative' as it comes along. Experience has taught them that it will become an outdated initiative almost before the ink is dry on the memo that exhorts them to embrace it. Many teachers express frustration at being prevented (by overwhelming paperwork, over-large classes and unresolved discipline issues) from teaching as well as they otherwise could.

There has been a move away from the autonomy of the teacher in the classroom to the teacher as a corporate employee, delivering a one-size-fits-all curriculum that gives them little scope for treating each child's learning needs individually. This leaves teachers (and pupils) demoralised and disempowered.

On top of this, the growth of inclusion policies and a move away from specialist units means that, alongside the growth of numbers in a class, there is also a burgeoning problem of indiscipline and of children who cannot effectively learn in the classroom environment. While inclusion is laudable, we must acknowledge that the more diverse a group is, the more difficult it is for a teacher to teach. Similarly, ill-disciplined children who are disruptively resistant to being educated should not be allowed to compromise the education of others. They are, in any case, unlikely to have their individual learning needs met within a typical mainstream classroom, and need specialist services.

Teachers should be cherished, not exploited. We therefore make the following recommendations:

- There needs to be a move away from testing and back to education, with the teacher developing effective learning tools to meet the specific needs of the children they encounter. We must trust good teachers to teach well, and we must return to them some autonomy in the classroom and within the curriculum.
- We endorse the educational value in continuing to reduce class sizes.
- Pupils with longstanding behaviour problems who are frequently disrupting classes should be temporarily or permanently removed, at the school's discretion, to specialist units, either on or off the school site.
- Non-contact time should be increased for every teacher.
- Resources for continuing professional development should be increased, and should include funds to extend mentoring and induction schemes for teachers in their first year.
- A formal system of sabbatical years should be established for teachers; there should be an expectation that teachers will periodically undertake personally- and educationally-beneficial research and development.
- Teacher shortages should not be addressed by training that is exclusively employment-based. In England and Wales, OFSTED has found that on-the-job teacher training under the Graduate Teacher Programme compares unfavourably with mainstream training carried out in partnership between higher education institutions and schools. (On-the-job teacher training is not an option in Scotland).

Appendix 6

The Effectiveness of One-to-one Writing Support

Stevie Davies

Royal Literary Fund Fellowships: The Human Exchange

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Voices

The Ethos and Experience of One-to-one Royal Literary Fund Writers' Meetings with Students**1: 'A Private Space'**

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

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

As one respondent to the questionnaire put it, 's/he' was 'not afraid [sic] to ask questions'. The sense of safety is provided in the first instance by the Fellow's occupation of private space. By private space, I mean the four walls of the office, with a closed door and the assurance of total confidentiality. In a more public space, students would not feel comfortable in confiding the problems they encounter with written work. But this 'private space' is also to be understood in terms of the atmosphere engendered by the Fellow: a sense of personal welcome and support in which the student can feel at ease. Members of staff and postgraduate students also benefit from the enclosure and privacy the Royal Literary Fund secures for them. Academics beset by writer's block or the conundrum presented by publishers' rejection letters which contradict one another require a strictly guarded confidentiality and a private space in order to open up about these problems outside an environment which regards admission of weakness with contumely. This culture of support lies at the heart of the Royal Literary Fund one-to-one system.

2: Granting the Student a Voice

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

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

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

3: Focused Personal Attention

'Fellow is an apt title,' writes one user of the scheme. 'I was received as an equal, on a friendly human level.' 'I was made to feel like an equal,' says another. A Fellow reinforces this by insisting, 'I treat [students] as equals (which they are of course)'. This two-way exchange may be called the soul of the Royal Literary Fund scheme and the above student's experience reflects a commonly expressed sense that, within the relationship of mentor and mentee, there is one shared and exclusive aim: to discover the particular problems of the individual and to solve them together. The ethos of the meeting is not a *de haut en bas* talking-down from a superior to an inferior but the putting together of two heads to discover ways of dealing with problems. The meeting takes place on the human level as well as on the pedagogic level or, rather, the pedagogic element is rooted in and depends on the human meeting.

Respondents replied that the apprehensive awe which preceded the first visit to a 'real' writer, an 'expert', soon evaporated when it was discovered that the Fellow met students with interest and in a spirit of equality: 'Considering [her] experience and expertise I still felt very comfortable, never intimidated. She never told me what to do, she may only suggest something and if I disputed this she would accept it because respecting my opinion too'. The confession of comparable flaws

6. The Effectiveness of One-to-one

and experiences by the Fellow may also relax tensions and the same respondent commented that it 'made you feel even profession [sic] writers suffer the same problems as students'. Another student remembers her Fellow 'talking about how she writes and her particular problems'. And a Writing Fellow notes that 'I often say that I have problems with commas or colons myself, that this is quite normal but you can work out what you are meant to do with them.' The terms in which she phrases her response to their anxiety echoes the actual words, plain and simple, she would use to the student. Fundamentally, this is a levelling and egalitarian idiom which, somewhat exaggerating the symmetry between mentor and mentee in relation to punctuation difficulties, offers a hand-up by someone who knows by experience the difficult climb and its negotiation.

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

4: The Nature of the Welcome

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

Fellows themselves express a range of views about the 'hospitality' aspect of the session and most dismiss 'fussing over coffee' as eating into the serious business of the meeting. While some have spacious studies, others are confined to pokier and more utilitarian offices. One works in 'a pleasant, well-appointed room... with a view over the College garden... table and chairs... armchairs for more relaxed talking'. Another has 'a comfy chair for the student, and a big window with a good view'. But another insists that the Fellow 'adapt to the space'. Where the accommodation is less than opulent, it can be made to 'feel good', in an atmosphere which is not dependent on furniture. However, size does matter. Where Fellow and student are crammed into a small space, 'using our knees and getting rather physically close', the conditions of trust and ease are jeopardized. The student needs both closeness and distance in order to avoid problems of undue intimacy which will be addressed later. Fellows are exceedingly alert to this danger. One notes that his office 'feels business-like rather than homely, and I've tried to keep it that way because I'd prefer my work with the students to be more technical than supportive'.

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

5: What is the Problem?

Students occasionally arrive in the Fellow's office in a distraught and inarticulate state. Fellows may be confronted by a tearful person who has received punishing criticism of his or her writing which, though not so intended, has been experienced as 'rubbishing'. In such cases, a gentle, tactful and commonsensical response is called for and the Fellow, whilst enquiring into the source of the anxiety in a reassuring way, will at once seek to calm the student and at the same time consider his or her suitability for the scheme. It often becomes clear that the Counselling Officer, the Dyslexia Unit or the English for Non-Native Speakers Department are the appropriate places for students whose troubles have deep-rooted causes that we are not trained to address.

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

Some cases of student distress however may only be superficially extreme. The problem often lies in a student's complete inability to fathom the meaning of the tutor's comments on her essay, occasionally indeed to read them. If it is difficult to articulate these, the Fellow asks to see the work that has been criticised and together mentor and mentee puzzle out what the major problems seem to be. By studying the papers together and sorting out the nature and root of the problem, attention is diverted from the embarrassed student, releasing eye contact and allowing the chance for recovery.

The same diversionary effect may be achieved when the mentor notes the student's name and details on the Royal Literary Fund form. There is a calm pause which enables the student to recover 'face', while the Fellow's eyes are occupied with the prosaic task of taking notes.

The immediate attention the Fellow can give to apparently small issues of punctuation, syntax, format, will often help the student to realize that improvement is readily possible. For instance, a single glance at the page tells the writer if paragraphing is either excessively fragmentary on the one hand or non-existent on the other. To pass across this simple piece of information is to offer a fragment of hope and an indication of help to come.

6: Small is Beautiful

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

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

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

As one student writes, 'Sometime, [the Fellow] would write a small change to show me how simple it was to alter a paragraph, and then I could follow by this example'. Another says, 'The sessions teach you what you cannot pick up from reading text books, etc. Even the smallest pieces of advice (e.g. not using capital letters) is obvious but makes a huge difference'. Another recalls that her Fellow 'taught me how to use the semi-colon properly. As soon as I had mastered this, I was able to cut down the word length of my essay (one of my problems) on my own'.

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

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

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

Another Fellow speaks of moving in the course of a session from the 'biggest problem in the work' brought to her to going 'through the piece together, looking at the nuts and bolts'. In the imagery chosen by each of these Fellows we see a process of demystification going on. The message is that students can be guided to recognize problems as mundane and manageable. Another Fellow counsels that with 'very weak students', rather than depress herself and the student by attempting (and failing) to address the magnitude of the problem, 'I'm now ... focusing only on three or four specific problems ... for each essay'. Here we see the application of practical commonsense to an intransigent problem, so that it becomes capable, not of solution, but of amelioration. Both Fellow and student benefit.

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

7: The Listening Spirit

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

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

Here, of course, we must exercise care: we cannot claim that writers have any monopoly on sensitivity or a listening ear. But there is no doubt that the habitual elasticity of the writer's imagination, his or her necessary openness to the variety of human nature combined with verbal attunement, have the potential to enhance the writer's capacity to enter into the student's experience. The report quoted above ends by saying that 'she gets interested in things you're interested in'. This extends the concept of empathy by pointing to the way an open mind will take fire from another. As writers, we work a great deal by the vicarious spirit of the imagination. Several Fellows emphasize the fascinations for themselves of being initiated into subjects ('What is snow?' 'What is the relation of albumen to yolk?' 'What causes phantom pain?' 'What motivated Napoleon?') of which they have no prior knowledge. Where ignorance is perceived as curiosity, it is accurately identified with bliss.

8: The Boundaries of Empathy

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

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

We have to hold our borders and boundaries. Students who have been given low grades will be all too happy to censure their lecturers if given a chance: that is human nature. However, Fellows are adept at finding ways of heading off such inappropriate topics. They would not last five minutes in their institutions if they indulged such fruitless and impertinent criticism. One student pithily and trenchantly advises, 'Keep it short and not too frequent and then this "danger" [of 'undue intimacy' or 'therapy'] could be kept at bay. Any vulnerable student could latch on to a sympathetic ear, but the forum is to better ons [sic] writing... '.

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

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

However, Fellows do not take the possibility of undue dependence and intimacy lightly. There is an awareness that students in the one-to-one situation 'may think they are getting personal attention for their own sake, and thereby embark on student-tutor fantasy'. I confess that I have not been immune to the temptation to see 'my' students' improved grades as somehow 'my' grades too, and I have heard other Fellows make similar observations. From this consciousness arises the strict tone of many Fellows when they stress professionalism, whilst allowing for the possibility that 'therapy is a side-effect – more confidence, control, etc.', as well as the caveat expressed in one thoughtful Fellow's remarks that 'there is inevitably an element of therapy in its broadest sense in the relationship'. S/he goes on, however, to observe with jesting seriousness that 'I'm far too old for there to be a problem with undue intimacy'. Several others echo one Fellow's insistence that s/he is not 'a particularly cosy person to be with': they emphasize the offering of focused insight and dispassionate, impartial advice.

When Fellows notice the 'complex and subtle' dynamic shifting as students 'dump their emotional problems on the Fellow or lean too heavily', they take early steps to obviate the problem.

9: The Shape of the Meeting

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

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

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

10: Humour

Communication within these structures can take a variety of forms. Although seriousness without solemnity is the appropriate norm, humour can be crucial not only to the pleasure of the learning relationship but also to its efficacy. Fellows have no gospel to preach and no theories to proselytise. One student says that humour 'makes the sessions more relaxed. It was quite funny once when we were looking for a poem on the internet & a really loud piece of classical music came on—I don't think I would have laughed as much if I'd been with a lecturer'. This personal ease with the Fellow has significance beyond the matey. Everyone likes to be liked and Fellows are no exception. The student's memory of bursting out laughing (which would have severely embarrassed her in a more formal situation) does not imply disrespect but personal trust. Another student astutely describes the role of humour in this way: 'Useful helps you see that essays are not the be all and end all [sic]'. This is a lesson many of those conscientious souls who are stressed beyond what is healthy for them need to learn. Writers, who enter the university from outside its walls and return whence they came, belong to a world which frames the academy and, in an important way, cuts it down to size. While it is true that we are not counsellors, it is also true that Fellows can implicitly remind their mentees that there is a world out there, to which nothing could be less relevant than the writing of an academic essay. Fellows bring in to the institution their independence of it.

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

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

A mature student sums up the variable role of humour: 'For me, I find humour a fantastic way of alleviating embarrassing situations (for me one might be my lack of formal education, now slightly redeemed by the degree). Having a sense of humour about this, and general human follies, makes it less painful. Yet for someone else this might not be the case'.

11: Confidence and Independence

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

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

However important grades may be as a motivating factor in bringing the student to the Fellow, they are secondary to the activity which goes on in the Fellow's room. Another student makes this distinction pertinently: 'I found that getting marks back from tutors did not always explain in enough detail why one essay was 60% and the other 70%. When [the Fellow] read the essays, she was not looking to grade, but improve the essay. This meant that she was able to point out where bits were muddled or contradictory, show me how it can be altered. It was this process of actually showing and explaining how my writing could be improved that was very useful'. Hence, the Fellow leaves grades to take care of themselves: what lies at issue is the writing and its quality. Sometimes valuable and important work can be done by putting a sample text on-screen and having the student make changes, cut and paste, restructure, with the mouse passing to and fro between the two. Or both parties will jot down notes. One Fellow makes considerable use of sketches and diagrams, which the student executes under her supervision, to plan the task in hand. This use of graphic representation cuts the task visually down to size: the whole plan can be viewed as a single structure. At other times the Fellow will explain a point of grammar or logic. At a certain point, however, these joint efforts will reach their natural conclusion: put simply, they will begin to bore the student. The fledgling takes flight.

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

There is a leaven of students described by one Fellow as 'passive, sitting back and watching while you edit their work'. Such passive vessels are loath to leave, for they are very comfortable where they are; yet they do not really learn how to improve or, indeed, learn anything at all. Fellows are alert to the importance of the student's responsibility for her or his own writing. A minority of students blame the Fellow for their own inability to progress: this parasitical attitude often accompanies and is symptomatic of problems of personal instability which Fellows cannot and should not have to deal with. In general the exigencies of the timetable will close the ever-open door to people impervious to learning. In other instances, Fellows need to explain to the student that they have now offered all possible help. We learn, too, from our own mistakes. I now regret the time I spent mentoring a prolix and domineering mature student, an ex-teacher who wished to learn by the unpromising method of 'teaching' me the erroneous futility of my suggestions. I allowed these hectoring digressions to command too much attention for too long. Such forbearance might have been permissible had this individual been able to garner anything from me despite the handicap her compulsions put on the learning experience. She did not. Royal Literary Fund Fellows do not have time or energy to waste.

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

12: Good Idea

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

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

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

The ‘good idea’ of the Royal Literary Fund Fellowship scheme lies in its ability to empower and encourage in a genuinely democratic way. In an academic world which has increased student numbers at an unprecedented rate, without simultaneous expansion of staff numbers, the discrepancies in the system – between students from impoverished backgrounds and those from privileged homes and schools; and between elite and non-elite universities – have magnified. This disparity is to a marked degree alleviated by the scheme’s ability to address the individual’s problems.

As one thoughtful student puts it, ‘It was an invaluable experience and a rare one to be able to learn from a distinguished author in person, face-to-face. The “human contact” aspect of this scheme is where all the encouragement comes from and is vital to its success, given that access to a literary mentor is usually reserved for privileged or high-flying students’.

QUESTIONNAIRES

1 Student Questionnaire

Royal Literary Fund Questionnaire: The Writing Fellow’s Work at the University

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

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

Large Baggy Questions

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

The Nature of the Exchange

1. How were you received by the Fellow, in personal terms?
2. How was your half-hour or hour structured? (Was it structured at all?)
3. Did you feel adequately listened to, as you explained problems & issues?
4. Did the Fellow seem to be enjoying the meeting and does that make a difference?
5. Did you benefit from the confidentiality of the relationship?
6. What was the effect of the meeting(s) on your confidence and peace of mind?
7. When discussing problems with the Fellow, did you feel supported or judged?
8. Did the fact that the Fellow is not part of the assessment process make the relationship easier?
9. What, if any, means did the Fellow use to put you at your ease and to reassure you?
10. Is there a sense of equality/equivalence in the relationship, and did you ever feel talked down to?
11. Did the Fellow ‘lead’ or ‘follow’? (i.e. was she attempting to show you the right path or eliciting what you wanted to say? – or both?)
12. Do you notice any mirroring in the exchange? (for instance, if you expressed a problem, did the Fellow ever recall her experience of similar problems?)
13. What is the role of humour in the relationship?
14. Are there dangers that the relationship might deviate into undue intimacy on the one hand or ‘therapy’ on the other?
15. When the half hour, or hour, was up, how did the Fellow signal this?
16. Would it be possible to become too dependent on the Fellow or does she attempt to make you independent of her? If so, how, and how successfully?
17. One year on, do you imagine you will carry with you/ have you experienced any gain from the relationship, and, if so, what?
18. Anything else you can think of?

2 Fellows’ Questionnaire

Dear Fellow or ex-Fellow,

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

Many thanks – ever, Stevie Davies

6. The Effectiveness of One-to-one

Large Baggy Questions

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

The Nature of the Exchange

1. Does the nature of the space affect the meeting with students? Do you work in an office atmosphere or do you have comfortable chairs, offer coffee, etc.? Do these things matter or make a difference?
2. How do you structure your sessions?
3. What means do you use to put students at their ease and to reassure them? Is there a role for humour, chat, etc?
4. Do you feel students benefit from the confidentiality of the relationship and from the fact that the Fellow is not part of the assessment process?
5. What seems to be the effect of the meeting(s) on students' confidence and peace of mind? How can one tell?
6. Are there dangers that the relationship might deviate into undue intimacy on the one hand or 'therapy' on the other?
7. When the half hour, or hour, is up, how do you signal this?
8. Would it be possible for the student to become too dependent on the Fellow, and how do you ensure that they become independent of you?
9. I imagine that we have all had one or two bad experiences in one-to-ones. Would you mind letting me know any of yours (in strictest confidence) and how you tackled it?

