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Writing from A to U

Questions about writing across the 16-19 transition

John Hodgson and Ann Harris argue that we need to develop a fuller understanding of students' writing as they move from A-level to University, and ask readers to help

The quality of students' writing concerns teachers at all levels of education. Studies in higher education have recently raised questions about the relation of students' academic literacies, especially writing, to the culture and pedagogy of the university (Lea and Street, 1998; Lea and Stierer, 2000; Ganobscik-Williams, 2006; Murray et al., 2008; and several others). In this context, the Royal Literary Fund's 2006 report *Writing Matters* was widely noticed because it was written not by academics but by professional writers. For several years, the Royal Literary Fund has sent its Fellows - published authors - into universities to work with students, mainly by means of one-to-one tutorials. As the Fellows corresponded with each other about their experiences in universities, the Report explains, they found 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 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 and week out, teaching the fundamentals of literacy, that the RLF decided to commission this report.
(Davies et al, 2006)

The NATE Post-16 and HE Committee discussed this report and a review appeared in *English Drama Media 7* (Hodgson, 2007). Although we did not entirely agree with the line of the report, especially in its opening chapter, the issues it raised have preoccupied us over the last few years, and we feel it is now time to try to answer some key questions about student writing - student writing not only in higher education, but over the transition from pre-university studies. As the RLF report suggests, the responsibility for academic literacy (however defined) belongs to all involved in the progress

of students through school and into higher education.

We return to the RLF report in the final part of this article. The concerns it raised about student writing are wide, and we shall focus our enquiry on writing in the English subjects. What kinds of writing do students produce as they progress through A-level and commence university courses in English? For whom do they write? And for what purposes? We shall take a broad view of the issues, considering teachers' expectations and students' experiences of writing across levels as the educational escalator moves from A-level towards the first year of university. Deliberately, we shall ask questions, both general and specific, rather than offer definitive answers, as we believe that further research needs to be done on the various processes involved. For example, what kinds of writing are afforded by the various A-level Englishes - Literature, Language, and Language and Literature? While, on the other side of the transition, what kinds of writing are required of students of English at university? How do the practices compare? In what ways are they changing as a result of recent curricular initiatives? What is the significance of the differing writing practices in terms of pedagogy, curriculum and assessment? Which theoretical perspectives offer the best approach to understanding what is at stake, and what tentative recommendations might we make to teachers at each level?

We shall focus first on Literature, as this remains the most popular English study at A-level and in higher education, but shall also consider the practices and requirements of language studies, and touch upon creative writing. Historically, literary writing at A-level has focused on the single text, or on two texts studied comparatively. The dominant writing mode has always been the 'critical' essay, in which a proposition (usually supplied by a teacher or examiner) is addressed and argued with close textual reference. Despite the wide availability of published literary criticism and readers' guides, students at A-level have generally been discouraged from making extensive reference to critical studies, although the pressure for 'personal response' to be 'informed' has also tended to curtail some more

explicit and honest responses from young people. The introduction of assessment objectives (as part of the *Curriculum 2000* modular curriculum) has, however, focused attention on discrete ‘skills’ of interpretation and presentation rather than on a holistic approach to the literary text. Thus, the larger discursive proposition (‘Is Hamlet really mad?’) was dislodged by an emphasis on textual form (‘Discuss Shakespeare’s presentation of Hamlet’s “madness”’) (NATE Post-16 Committee, 2004).

Despite the fundamental discipline of literary criticism, the student-centred, ‘personal response’ tradition of A-level Literary studies did seem to promote modes of writing that allowed students to demonstrate affect and engagement in their textual readings. ‘Experimental’ (yet highly popular) syllabuses such as that offered by the Associated Examining Board from the early seventies until 2000 allowed a certain amount of ‘recreative’ writing to be included in the candidate’s coursework. Students might write an additional chapter for an established novel, rewrite a scene from a play from the point of view of a minor character (for example, after studying Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*), or parody an official document (emulating the style of Swift’s *A Modest Proposal*). Such work was always a minor element in a candidate’s production, but was held in high regard by many teachers, who believed that a course in literature should allow some opportunity for students to write ‘creatively’ and non-discursively while revealing their stylistic and textual knowledge (NATE Post-16 Committee, 2004).

This kind of work disappeared in the reductive *Curriculum 2000* reforms, but has enjoyed a revival in the new A-level courses offered since the curricular changes of 2008. These courses have also increased significantly the amount of reading required of students, and have attempted to shift focus from the single text to a more cultural and contextual study. The number of assessment objectives has been reduced, and the modular structure modified. Awareness of literary criticism - and indeed critical theory - is now required of students (NATE Post-16 Committee, 2007). Although only a

minority of students proceed to university English, it was hoped that these changes would erode the gap between the curricula of A-level and that of higher education, thereby reducing the concomitant shock of the new experienced by students as they embark on university courses. David McVey (2008) suggests that a student facing his or her first university writing assignment

may feel like a couch potato lining up for a marathon. How can we give students the confidence to write, and how can we ensure that they flex their writing muscles so that essays and other written work do not come as a shock?

From a student perspective, it would seem reasonable to assume that initial expectations of writing at university should not be radically different from writing at A-level. Our first question then is: how far, and in what ways, have these changes impacted upon teachers and students at A-level, and have they affected the experience of transition in a fruitful way?

One strength of the traditional approach to writing at A-level was an assumption that much of the work that students do during their English courses would be formative. Students would prepare for examination assessment by writing a number of essays throughout their programme of study, each of which would normally receive teacherly comment. Even assessed coursework would usually be selected from a larger quantity of essays which the teacher would have seen produced and developing over time. Modularisation changed this: a coursework module required the production of one essay, and the regulations evinced much concern about authenticity. As a result, the teacher's role became primarily that of summative assessor and validator. Of course, teachers have always had the responsibility to ensure that the 'work of the course' was the original production of their students. Paradoxically, this is easier to achieve when students produce a large amount of coursework relatively informally, since the teacher becomes familiar with a student's style, gets to know what his or her work is usually like, and can identify potential for progress. This is a better assurance of validity than a regime where students write one or two

essays only, under 'controlled conditions' (NATE Post-16 Committee 2004). There is some evidence to suggest that concern about the reliability of coursework assessment has increased since 2008, partly and justifiably because of concerns about plagiarism and the internet, with the consequence that teachers are increasingly constructed as examiners as well as facilitators. At the same, teachers report that the influence of externally imposed assessment objectives is as strong as ever. Our second question then is: to what extent is formative writing and assessment still practised in A-level English Literature?

At university, students may find fewer opportunities than at school or college to practise their writing under the tutelage of an interested mentor. As a result, concern has been expressed about the process of adjustment. Effective transition experiences, according to Krause (2001, p.147) 'facilitate integration into the university community through positive educational experiences and are responsive to students' needs'. While the approach taken by various English departments to student writing naturally varies, such facilitative transition experiences are not always evident. A recent survey of undergraduate students in six UK universities found one institution which had an explicit policy of building on students' A level experience and an established practice of formative assessment in the first year (Hodgson, 2010).

The literary critical essay is usually regarded a very important part of a university English Literature course; but its importance, for tutors and for students, is fundamentally as a means of assessment. Higher education students report that the essay is the only part of the programme that really counts; seminar and lecture attendance are often effectively optional (Hodgson, 2010). The assessed essay is a monologic form of discourse, and students may feel that English at university lacks something of the communal and nurturing experience of A-level. As Lea and Street (2000, p35) point out: 'A student's personal identity . . . may be challenged by the forms of writing required.' This change in their experience of English is

accompanied by two other major changes: a tectonic shift in the amount of reading they are expected to do; and an emphasis on the importance of literary and cultural theory that far exceeds anything they may have previously encountered. The assessed course essay becomes the focus of all the anxieties thus generated (Hodgson, 2010). The student may, as a result, be unclear as to whether the assessor will expect a focus on the primary text, as practised at A level, or a theoretical discussion that, according to some tutors, is 'what HE English is all about' (Green, 2005). Student may feel they are drowning in a sea of cultural theory that bears little relationship to previous knowledge and understanding and which cannot easily be integrated into the conceptual frameworks carried over from school (Snapper, 2009). In this situation, they will adopt whatever strategy seems most plausible, including a regression to an A-level approach or a pastiche of academic writing (Hodgson, 2010). Thus, our third question is: in what ways might higher education address the difficulties that transition students experience in writing? And, associated with this, might better communication between university and A-level teachers assist this process?

Turning to language studies and creative writing, we find very different practices in writing across the transition. Unlike A-level English Literature, A-level English Language (and A-level Language and Literature) has always made explicit its theoretical approach to the study of language, and has required students to understand and adopt a range of conceptual frameworks (NATE Post-16 Committee, 2004). For this reason, it appears that the transition from A-level language studies to university language studies is much easier for many students than the transition in Literature studies. Literature students frequently report that they don't know what their tutors want: the requisite level of understanding of post-structural literary and cultural theory may not be made explicit in transition, so that students feel they have to divine their way and identify what is required as the course progresses. There is some evidence, however, that Language students in higher education find the concepts embedded in their courses somewhat more straightforward, and enjoy a 'hands on' approach to

language study that is contiguous, rather than disjunctive, with their previous studies (Hodgson, 2010). (It is worth noting that this observation does not necessarily apply to courses in Linguistics. A recent proposal to develop an A-level in Linguistics has not so far borne fruit, and students moving from A-level Language to university Linguistics are likely to find a challenging shift in orientation.) Our fourth question, then, is: what kinds of writing do students in higher education Language courses actually do, and how does this relate to the writing previously undertaken in A-level Language?

Practices in creative writing across the transition also appear different. Despite strenuous efforts by a number of committed teachers and examiners, a proposed A-level course in Creative Writing has not yet become established. However, new courses in A-level Literature have introduced opportunities for original writing into the sixth form English curriculum to complement those already available in A-level English language. These opportunities are circumscribed, however, in various ways. They usually offer students the freedom to write 'recreatively' in the style of an established author, to demonstrate awareness of genre, form, style and similar aspects of literary craft. This is clearly a limited kind of originality linked to textual awareness and stylistic familiarity. Moreover, formal assessment usually requires the student to write a commentary on his or her creative response, in order to demonstrate explicit awareness of the textual strategies employed. There is some evidence that assessors may pay more attention to this commentary rather than to the creative writing it describes (Green, 2010) not least of all because the criteria for its assessment are better established. Our fifth question, then, is: What is the state of creative writing at A-level? Does current provision offer a satisfactory pedagogy, curriculum and method of assessment?

Creative Writing is rather better established in higher education, both as an undergraduate and a postgraduate subject in its own right and as an element within English degree courses. It appears to be relatively

untrammelled by the restrictions found within A-level, and students report their pleasure in the opportunities afforded by courses and modules in this subject (Hodgson, 2010). An important aspect of this pleasure appears to be the practice of frequent writing and peer feedback: students often write weekly and present their work to their peers for immediate comment, criticism and appreciation. This practice contrasts markedly with the practice of writing and assessment in university Literature courses, where essays are written fairly infrequently, and each is likely to be formally assessed and accredited towards the final year mark. However, it appears that higher education may have its own concerns about the validity and assessment of creative writing. Students report that it sometimes seems more difficult to obtain a good final mark for creative writing than for conventional literary study (Hodgson, 2010). Our sixth question therefore would be: should we aim to develop a coherent practice for the teaching and assessment of creative writing across the transition?

Behind the six questions we have asked so far is a much larger question which has been raised in various ways and in different forums over recent years. The Royal Literary Fund report *Writing Matters* implicates pre-university teachers in its critique of undergraduate writing. It gives an anecdotal account of one student of English 'at an elite university' who seemed not 'to comprehend the basic components of a sentence', and of another who claimed that his vocabulary was so poor that he could not think of the words he needed. The introductory chapter to the RLF report laments the passing of an age when 'the teaching of grammar and the formalities of written expression were . . . regarded as essential to sound pedagogical practice'. Without this, many students, the report suggests, 'find themselves living in linguistic contexts that simply don't correspond to traditional expectations'. Perhaps these 'contexts' are matters of class or race, or of age or inclination: 'The home language of many students in Britain today is not necessarily standard English.' New technology is also implicated: '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.’ As a result, we are confidently told: ‘To access and download internet content is not to learn’ (Davies et al 2006).

The first part of the RLF report, then, blames what is identified as poor undergraduate writing in terms of the failure of schools and colleges to teach ‘fundamental’, ‘basic’ writing and reading skills, and in terms of the insidious effect of modern technology. While it is easy to dismiss this critique as a hysterical and nostalgic discourse that seeks to construct the problems it so graphically describes, it is also important to recognise the enormous social and educational changes that have led to the present generation of undergraduates. Significantly more students aged 18 progress to higher education compared with even a generation ago. Young people who, had they been born 30 years before, would have left school at 15 or 16 to go directly into work, now expect and are expected to enter higher education. It is hardly surprising that university teachers find themselves confronted with students with alternate skill sets, different kinds of cultural capital and different expectations than before.

Thus, it is reasonable to ask - it is in fact the purpose of this article to ask - whether the pedagogy and practice of writing through the school years and into higher education should be considered more holistically, in order to understand and to gain knowledge that will help us to offer students the best possible learning experiences. Sally Mitchell has asked whether there might indeed be a lack of capacity for writing in some students as they enter higher education that could and should be addressed at both HE and previous levels (Mitchell 2010). We think that it is important, in considering this matter, to conceptualise the nature and practice of writing (academic and non-academic) adequately: to view writing skills less as properties of the individual than as cognitive and communicative practices that are developed within social life (Lea and Street, 1998). The RLF report itself gives an analogy with music, which is learned by attending to ‘The way in which the performers of the art, musicians, play [their] notes’:

In effect, before you can become yourself, you must become your teacher... Artistic identity comes from study, imitation, absorption of expertise. Only at the end of this process can it achieve independence (Davies et al 2006: xiv).

This suggests a pedagogical and learning experience which is inclusive and participative. Our final question then is: how far do contemporary pedagogic, curricula and assessment processes foster the 'study, imitation and absorption' suggested in the above quotation?

To find answers to this and our other questions, we wish to understand in some detail the writing practices of students as they move through their A-level years and into higher education. We hope to approach this both diachronically and synchronically: to compare writing practices over time (as students move from A-level to university) and across subjects (comparing the writing in English with that in other A-level subjects, and the experience of students taking joint courses at university). We are aware that this is an ambitious proposal which will most likely be fulfilled through a series of relatively small projects rather than a major inquiry that NATE does not in any case have the resources to pursue. We would like, however, to encourage colleagues teaching both at A-level and within higher education to become involved. Most interesting would be examples of students' work annotated to indicate the processes of preparation, writing and assessment.

What is at stake here is a deeper understanding of the nature of academic literacies. We suspect that the problems that students experience in writing are not so much technical as epistemological: they need to understand not only the kind of writing expected but also the kinds of knowledge and understanding intrinsic to their study. Since the transition seems most significant in this area, the writing practices of students moving from A-level Literature to university Literature study might be particularly telling in this respect, as might be the writing practices of joint honours' students. We expect, over the coming months, to initiate a small number of projects to help us to understand these issues. Whether you teach at A-

level or at undergraduate level, your experience and assistance would be greatly appreciated.

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