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“It is hard to know what you are being asked to do.” Deciphering codes, constructing schemas

Introduction

“Writing is the only thing that matters on the course,” claimed a third year university English Literature student. Many arts and humanities undergraduate students in the UK would agree that the assessed essay is a most important factor in their experience, as the greater part of their degree result depends on it (Hodgson and Harris 2012). Students who have studied A level English may find that they are asked to write relatively infrequently at university in comparison to the demands of their pre-university studies; but most of this writing is in the form of academic essays that comprise a large part, if not the totality, of the assessment regime (Krause 2001: 150; Gawthrop and Martin 2003: 42; Hodgson 2010: 27).

How do undergraduates approach lengthy high-stakes writing assignments whose demands differ significantly from those of their former A level studies? Many undergraduates contrast the “tick-box”, assessment-objective-led essays of their previous A level English courses with the far less explicit demands of their university tutors (Hodgson 2010, 2011). This question is particularly relevant at a time of heightened concerns about the relationship between A level and university English, and about the preparedness of students moving on to higher education (Ofqual 2012). One fruitful way of researching this may be to study the work of joint honours students. The comparison of essays written in different disciplines by the same student offers a means of understanding the ways in which individual writers attempt to manage differing subject epistemologies and tutorial expectations. As this paper will show, this understanding may be enriched if analysis of student essays is combined with

data gained from group interviews with the same students about their experience of and perspectives on university study. This paper draws on group interviews conducted for a focus group study (Hodgson 2011) of the experience of UK joint honours undergraduate students of English (all of whom were studying English Literature, some jointly with English Language), and on detailed analysis of three students' coursework essays. It will demonstrate the ways in which students decode the demands of their subject disciplines and attempt to meet these by constructing accessible and individual schemas.

Student writing in higher education

Lea and Street's (1998) seminal article *Student Writing In Higher Education: An Academic Literacies Approach* argues that students' academic literacy should be understood not only in terms of their "study skills" or assimilation to the university culture, but in relation to "the whole institutional and epistemological context" (1998:158). From the student point of view, they argue, "a dominant feature of academic literacy practices is the requirement to switch practices between one setting and another, to deploy a repertoire of linguistic practices appropriate to each setting, and to handle the social meanings and identities that each evokes". Lea and Street claim that joint honours students are particularly challenged by the need to switch between "linguistic practices, social meanings and identities". They suggest that the key differences in the kind of writing required by different academic disciplines are epistemological: they are "defined through implicit assumptions about what constitutes valid knowledge within a particular context, and the relationships of authority that exist around the communication of these assumptions" (1998:170). Lea and Street give an account of a joint honours History and Anthropology student who could not understand why his Anthropology tutor (but not his History tutor) was highly critical of a lack of "structure" and

"argument" in his essay. Referring both to the student's spoken comments and to his essay, Lea and Street argue that the underlying issue is that the two tutors required "different conceptions of knowledge". In particular, the student had not understood the Anthropology tutor's requirement that he abstract theory rather than attend to factual detail as evidence (1998:165-167). The present paper addresses these issues by offering a substantive account of the work and experience of a range of students. It draws both on close analysis of a number of student essays and on their authors' spoken accounts of their experience of writing and assessment across disciplines. It then goes on to explore ways in which students attempt to accommodate discrepancies and differences.

In a later article, Lea (2004) contrasts the academic literacies approach with approaches to student learning that utilise the concept of communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998). She suggests that such studies often fail to recognise the multiplicity of communities of practice within the academy (Lea 2004:741). The experience of joint honours students, we would suggest, confirms that academic literacies "vary depending upon the particular context in which they occur" (2004:740). Lea admits that existing work in the field is limited to the extent that it has tended to foreground the assignment writing of "non-traditional" groups of students, whether in terms of age, gender, race or language (2004:742). This paper, by contrast, deals exclusively with what might be termed mainstream students.

Working within a cognitive psychology paradigm, Ahmed and Pollitt (1999) have offered a model of the ways in which students read examination questions and other assessment tasks. In this model, the student reads the question and forms a representation of it (which may or may not accurately reflect what is intended by the question) that frames their thinking and writing. In a later

article, Ahmed and Pollitt (2000) use schema theory (Bartlett 1932) to understand students' representations of what is involved in a particular assignment. Hyland (1990, 2008) has used the concept of schema to elaborate a genre theory of academic discourse that describes the ways in which students use cognitive frameworks to organise writing and accommodate new knowledge. In the context of this study, schema theory seems to us a valuable means of understanding students' inner constructions of what their written assignments (and the discipline more generally) may require. This paper will explore students' schemas by analysing their work in the light of their spoken comments, and consider the value of such schemas for their learning.

Approximately half of the 24 joint honours undergraduate students interviewed for the focus group study appeared to be struggling to develop a schema of what English in higher education involved. Glenys, a student from a post-92 university, spoke for many when she said that it had taken her a long time to understand what her English tutors required. In the first year of her degree, she had wondered why only one week was given to the study of each primary text: she had been used to a much longer period of study at A-level. Now, she thought: "It's more the canon of literature – it's like an overview of everything, rather than just studying one thing." However, when asked to describe what was specific about English Literature study, several students said the subject allowed deep focus on small areas of text, whereas subjects such as History, Philosophy and Cultural Studies required a wider contextual knowledge. In the words of Felicity, a student from a Russell Group university: "In English you can literally focus on two texts. Obviously you should read all the other ones, but it does help to be very focused." The close textual study of literature was often associated with an opportunity for free and personal interpretation, which most of the students felt more appropriate to English than to their other subject. According to Belinda, also from a Russell Group university: "You can

write what you believe about [the texts], and you've a fair chance of being right." However, Carla (from a post-92 university) said ruefully: "I know they say that in English you can't be wrong if you can back it up but I find you actually can. I found that out a lot this year."

These comments give merely a flavour of these students' disparate and sometimes contradictory concepts of university English study. We do not have the space to enlarge on these here, but argue rather that such data afford an opportunity for triangulating students' oral representations of subject and topic schemas with actual assignments written by the same students in each of their two disciplines. This paper builds on the English Subject Centre study mentioned earlier (Hodgson 2011), in which a total of seven focus groups of joint honours English students were conducted in five UK universities, including both Russell Group and post-92 institutions. The research reported here meets in two respects the concerns expressed by Lea (2004) about the partial focus of studies into academic literacy. Firstly, the students interviewed were "traditional" in the sense of having recently left pre-university education to enrol on full-time courses. Secondly, the focus groups allowed attention to be paid not only to the students' writing but also to broader issues revealed by their informal spoken accounts of university life.

Each student participating in a focus group was asked to bring or send a copy of an essay (preferably with tutors' comments) in each of their two disciplines. The majority complied with this request, and the opportunity to discuss actual essays within the focus groups enriched the discussion. The students gave permission for their work to be reproduced anonymously for analysis. The authors of this paper have conducted a preliminary analysis of the work of 13 students (those who provided at least two essays, some with tutorial feedback) in relation to their transcribed interviews. This work is ongoing and will be

published as part of a larger project on student writing across the transition to higher education. We have chosen for this paper to focus on just three of the 13 students and on their constructions of what writing in university involves, within the context of joint honours English study.

Viv

Viv was in her third year at a Russell Group university. She had taken both English Language and English Literature as A levels; she said that she had enjoyed combining these subjects and had been pleased to be able to continue both disciplines in higher education.

During her years at university, Viv had developed the view that "Language teachers are looking for different things from Literature lecturers". She found Literature essays "more daunting [than Language essays] because [response is] so subjective". Language studies were more soundly based on other people's research: "You would have the findings there rather than creating your own findings." Even when the two disciplines involved apparently similar activities (such as poetry analysis), Language, she thought, offered a clearer disciplinary method. "Poetry analysis within English Language is linguistic and quite technical, whereas poetry analysis in Literature is more subjective."

The essays that Viv had brought from her university studies exemplify very clearly her schematic construction of her two English subjects. The topic for the assessed essay from her Literature course was: "Compare the use of poetic form in two poems written by different poets"; Viv had chosen to compare Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey* with Shelley's *England in 1819*. Her essay begins with a bold conceptualisation of the relation between poetic form and social

structure, followed by a thesis statement of the liberating power of Wordsworth's choice of form:

The form of a poem is a significant indicator of attitudes of society during the period in which the poem was written, and Romantic poetry was heavily influenced by the revolutionary changes in the late 18th century. In this essay, I will focus on how the poetic form of a poem enabled the Romantic poet to portray the revolution as a positive release from political tension and social malfunction.

In the next paragraph, Viv informs us: "Blank verse form was the Romantic poet's subtle rebellion from structured poetic forms typical of classical poetry, such as rhyming couplets." "Consolation in nature," she tells us, was a major theme of Wordsworth's poetry. After a short account of the "severe mental distress" the poet experienced at the time the French Revolution, the essay returns to the approach outlined in the introduction:

The unlimited length of the blank verse form in Tintern Abbey enables a fully developed contemplation of many enriching qualities of nature that freed him from his depression.

Offering a view of Wordsworth's concept of childhood, Viv develops her theme:

Wordsworth saw childhood as a liberated state in which one is unlimited by self-consciousness and is free to admit their genuine internal thoughts. Compared to the strict poetic forms that were typical of classical poetry, the comparative lack of structure of the blank verse form imitates the liberated speech of a child, whose thoughts and feelings are not restrained by social expectations, but pour out openly. In this way, blank verse form suggests that Tintern Abbey consists of Wordsworth's honest contemplations that have not been modified by his self-conscious criticism. Blank verse form structures a poem into paragraphs, rather than in limiting stanzas, which enables Wordsworth to illustrate his 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' that he felt constitutes all good poetry.

Within her limited knowledge, Viv has indeed (as the assessor comments on the feedback sheet) made "a strong attempt to link social/political concerns to poetic form". However, none of her assertions is referenced; they clearly relate not to any specific secondary reading but to a more general schema of a direct relationship between poetic form and emotional liberation that Viv has drawn from her previous studies. The assessor, however, has not commented on Viv's attempt to probe Wordsworth's motivation; he or she has merely marked minor stylistic features of Viv's prose such as "the poetic form of a poem" in the first paragraph, and the move from "one" to "their" in the paragraph beginning "Wordsworth saw childhood". He or she has also placed a question mark next to the final sentence quoted above. This querying becomes a large red capitalised "NO!" when Viv states (a little later in the essay): "This poem belongs to the large poetic collection of *Lyrical Ballads*, in which most poems use a blank verse structure to present the poet's extensive contemplations." This assertion, which is factually incorrect, is a step too far for the assessor, who has tolerated without comment the various constructions – with no theoretical underpinning – that Viv has offered of the nature of blank verse and of the relationship between society, the poet, and poetic form.

Viv's Language essay, "Evaluate Lakoff's assumption that women's language expresses powerlessness", begins in a similarly confident way to her Literature assignment: again she makes a statement before outlining what she will do "in this essay". However, her confidence here has more authority. Her initial statement is referenced, and – unlike the first paragraph of the Literature essay – this introductory paragraph begins to make an argument that critiques Lakoff's proposition. This is implied in her subtle use of "conclude" and "supposedly", which suggests that she will come to a conclusion critical of Lakoff.

Lakoff (2004) studied the gender differences in style, semantics and syntax of language to conclude that women's speech reflects their subordinate social status in a male dominated society. She identifies several linguistic features which are more common in women's speech than in men is that supposedly express uncertainty and a lack of confidence. In this essay, I will discuss certain language features which Lakoff considers "women's language" and introduce other linguistic studies that challenge the assumption that women's language expresses powerlessness.

This essay is written with the confidence that comes from Viv's knowledge that her schema corresponds with that of the discipline and will be corroborated by her tutor. Addressing Lakoff's view that "tag questions are used more often by women by men, and request reassurance from the listener which reveals a lack of full confidence in the truth of that claim", Viv cites other writers to develop an opposing argument:

When researching the use of tag questions in the speech of both sexes, Holmes (1984) found that 61% of tag questions used by men express uncertainty, as opposed to just 35% used by women, and women used tag questions more than twice as much as men did as a facilitative device (Cameron et al, 1989:89).

Susan

Susan was also a third-year student at a Russell Group university. Like Viv, she was taking the same subjects for her degree as she had taken at A-level. In Susan's case, these were English Literature and History: she couldn't choose whether to do a degree in English Literature or in History, "and it turned out I could do them both here!" She was conscious that she had chosen two high status subjects, each of which saw themselves as "the equal if not the dominant part of the course".

Despite having studied the same subjects previously, Susan had found university study "very different" from A-level. It had taken a long time for her to appreciate what her tutors wanted:

I found at A level you didn't understand really what you were going to be doing until towards the second year – and then, if you're lucky, it clicked. It's the same when you come up here: you're clueless because it was so different. It is hard to know what you are being asked to do.

By this stage, however, Susan appeared to have developed a workable schema for both of her subjects. "You write in a similar way [in English and History] because they take the same things into account – values and attitudes." The texts for English were always written literature, whereas History required a range of sources: "You more talk about ideas and values of the time, just as they were and they manifest themselves in other ways besides written documents ... There would be statistics of people arrested in a certain jail, from a certain district for example." Susan said that she had to be careful when writing a resource analysis in History. "I'll analyse the source a bit too much, like I would in a Literature style, when I should expand the historical context". Despite these differences in data and analysis, Susan felt that the approach to essay writing required by the two subjects was broadly similar.

Susan's schema of the similar natures of her two subjects seems to have stood her in good stead when approaching the essays she offered for analysis. Her Literature essay, "Discuss the representation of gender in 20th-century crime fiction", offers a wide brief, but Susan's somewhat naïve initial statement moves quickly to a tight thesis:

As concepts such as sexual equality, homosexuality and transsexuality have become more widespread and accepted over the last century, so such issues have permeated into crime fiction and complicated the representation of gender. This essay will examine this issue in Raymond

Chandler's *The Big Sleep* and Val McDermid's *The Mermaids Singing*, with a focus on how gender is represented in terms of an identifiable and containable threat.

This initial argument –

In *The Big Sleep*, the city of Los Angeles is presented as a masculine, tough place and the dangers of violence and corruption are typically those of a man's world

– is quickly complicated on the second page of the essay:

So, it seems, *The Big Sleep* is a masculine crime fiction text with a masculine detective protagonist who faces masculine dangers and threats, and deals with them using masculine means. But, of course, the representation of gender is never quite this simple. For one thing, Marlowe does not always appear as absolutely masculine as one might assume. He relies at times on a perhaps more feminine tendency of intuition ... Far from being the constant and only knightly figure, moreover, he finds himself having to be saved from distress himself by Mona Mars. This scene, as Rzepka states, 'inverts the roles of rescuing knight and helpless maiden'.

The reference to Rzepka's article in *Modern Fiction Studies* 46:3 is correctly given in a footnote. While Susan does not interrogate concepts of gender within this fictional text, she is confident in deploying a binary construct of gender roles.

Susan's grasp of cultural concepts – "values and attitudes" – similarly informs her History essay, "Explain the influence of the concept of degeneration inside and outside the asylum in the late nineteenth century". Again, a short introduction makes a statement about the history of ideas in society before indicating the direction of the essay:

In the late 19th century, the concept of degeneration affected ideas about insanity and general well-being of the human race. [...] I will argue that degeneration theory caused a shift in focus in relation to the origins of

humanity and insanity, which could be seen both inside and outside of the asylum.

A well referenced argument demonstrates Susan's grasp of relevant concepts and her understanding of the epistemological similarities and differences between her two subjects. As in her English essay, she focuses on cultural ideas, but she argues by reference to historical accounts rather than through literary-textual analysis.

According to Darwin's theory of evolution, which was monumentally influential, the human race had evolved through a process of natural selection. The issue with this theory was the realisation that if humanity could progress, then surely it could also *regress*, both individually and as a species? ... Indeed, the insane were sometimes thought of in this way; their lack of will and reason were in common with lower life forms. As Oppenheim states, a 'loss of reason could only mean the absence of some essential quality of being human'.

Molly

Molly was in the third year at a post-92 university. She too was taking a joint honours course in what had previously been her A-level subjects: English Literature and Psychology. She had liked her A-level Psychology course but was unsure whether she wanted to work in the field. A joint course in English Literature and Psychology would, she thought, allow her to choose a wider range of future employment, possibly to include teaching.

Molly both enjoyed and was frustrated by the disciplinary differences (as she conceived them) between her two subjects. She felt that her English and Psychology tutors were looking for very different things. "In Psychology they really want you to look at other people's work and critique it: for example, this

paper was good but there was a small sample size. But in English they tend not to look for any critique of arguments. They just want you to pick up on what is there and really go deeper and analyse it." This epistemological difference had created difficulties for Molly in writing her essays. Her English tutor had criticised her repeated use of the phrase "it could be argued that". "But in Psychology," she exclaimed, "you can't just make a claim out of thin air!" English, she said, gave her "a break from the scientific rigour of Psychology [...]" but sometimes it's very difficult if I've got two assignments due around the same time – having to switch that mindset."

A comparison of the essays that Molly brought from her two subjects demonstrates the significant relation between this student's construction of disciplinary expectations and the way she composes her essays. Molly's Psychology essay, "Discuss some of the reasons why modern clinical and occupational psychologists rely more heavily on tests of individual cognitive abilities than tests of general intelligence", starts with a definition and citation:

In order to focus on the use of psychological testing within the occupational and clinical psychology disciplines, it is first necessary to define what is meant by psychological testing. The term refers to a "measuring tool which has three defining characteristics; 1) a psychological test is a sample of behaviour, 2) the sample is obtained under standardized conditions and 3) there are established rules for scoring, or for obtaining quantitative information from the behaviour sample" (Murphy and Davidshofer, 2001, p.3).

The introductory paragraph then moves to define the direction of the essay, and suggests a clear view of the knowledge required to answer the question:

However simply knowing the definition of psychological testing is insufficient on its own to understand the reasons why modern clinical and

occupational psychologists rely more heavily on tests of individual cognitive abilities than tests of general intelligence. In order to understand the preference for measuring individual cognitive abilities, one must consider background theory such as the 'g factor' and theories of general intelligence, along with theories of multiple intelligences and the measurement of specific cognitive abilities.

Molly has attended to the discourse of clinical psychology and has gathered concepts and examples that are cognate with the discipline and that her tutors will approve.

"In English," said Molly, "we are not encouraged to use secondary sources of information; which is very hard for me as a Psychology student, because I'm constantly looking for things to back up my argument." Molly's use of the word "information" in the context of English suggests the epistemological dissonance of her two subjects. The very title of Molly's English Literature essay implies a different disciplinary expectation from that inscribed in the title of her Psychology essay, which draws attention to the consensual beliefs of "modern clinical and occupational psychologists". It reads: "In your view, what does Eliot mean by 'tradition' in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'?" The difference between the titles supports Molly's view that English tutors "encourage you very much to develop your own ideas from the text, whereas, in Psychology, you can't just put forward a point without backing it up with previous research reports". Her introductory paragraph implies both some enjoyment in trying to construct her own concepts and frustration that she cannot (as she did in the introduction to her Psychology essay) give a definition:

In Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent", Eliot refers to many definitions of tradition, some of which reflect the generally accepted concept of tradition and some that challenge the accepted notion. The challenge in understanding Eliot's essay is the fact that he does not define

what he means by tradition from the beginning, but instead interweaves it into explanations of what he means throughout the essay.

Despite her tutors' alleged discouragement of secondary referencing, Molly supports her argument by citing a number of literary and cultural critics, including T.E.Hulme and George Orwell. Indeed, there is some sense that both the matter and manner of her Psychology writing has influenced her English Literature assignment:

"The more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates." Eliot argues here that not only does an artist have to depersonalise his work, but he has to remain almost two completely separate people. This can be linked back to the idea of the combining of tradition with the individual talent. However a Freudian critic would argue against this idea, since one must question whether it is possible for a writer or any artist to remain separate from his work.

Despite her notion of her English tutors' expectations, it seems that Molly cannot resist introducing a psychological critique of Eliot's concept.

Conclusion

This study uses student interview data and analysis of coursework assignments to explore students' challenges in academic writing. Their success in resolving these, we have suggested, depends on the quality and adequacy of the schemas they develop to represent both the disciplinary demands of their subject and the specific requirements of the assignment at hand. In their English assignments, Viv and (to a lesser extent) Molly have to try to adduce appropriate knowledge without a confident mental representation of the demands of the discipline and/or of the assignment. Susan, on the other hand,

has understood the cultural studies epistemology of her English assignments, and produces work that deftly meets expectations.

We recommend therefore that subject tutors take an oblique approach to improving their students' writing, by helping their tutees develop a schematic understanding of the epistemology of the subject and of the specific assignment. This would meet the demand expressed by many students in the focus group study for a clearer sense of what they are being asked to do in English. In many cases, this is likely to be a more productive method of attending to students' writing than a "study skills" approach to assumed deficits in their capacity to write appropriately in the university context.

As might be expected, this paper raises as many questions as it answers. Is Susan's relative success related to the cognate nature of History and English, as she experiences them, or are there other factors involved? Do joint honours students have greater difficulty than other students in understanding the epistemology of their subjects, or is such understanding a function of individual subject pedagogy? Is the epistemological contradictoriness of university English Literature study a sign of disciplinary health or a matter of concern? We plan in future work to explore such questions by a fuller account of the experience and writing of undergraduate joint honours students of English.

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