

# Thinking Writing: News from the Writing in the Disciplines initiative

Autumn 2006



Professor David Russell (Iowa State), Dr Theresa Lillis (OU) and Dr Jan Parker (OU and Cambridge) swapping notes at the Consortium

Thinking Writing is a Queen Mary initiative based in the Language and Learning Unit. It aims to raise awareness amongst academic teaching staff of the role that writing does, and could, play in key areas of higher education:

- **How writing constitutes ways of knowing, thinking, being and practising within disciplinary and professional fields**
- **How writing can engage and develop the learner**
- **How writing can prepare learners for professional and civic life**
- **How writing can be used to assess learners and to ensure that assessment furthers learning.**

Thinking Writing provides principled practical support for course and assignment development, including assessment and feedback. Details of the kinds of partnerships it offers can be found at:

[www.thinkingwriting.qmul.ac.uk/help.htm](http://www.thinkingwriting.qmul.ac.uk/help.htm)

This newsletter looks back at some events in the last academic year and forward to coming opportunities and developments.

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## The Queen Mary Consortium for Writing in the Disciplines

Sally Mitchell

For two days in May 2006, Queen Mary welcomed colleagues from around 30 Higher Education Institutions to discuss principles and practices relating to 'learning to write' and 'writing to learn' in disciplinary contexts.

Participants were a mix of practising academic teachers and people with specific responsibility for developing teaching and learning in their institution. Each person we invited was asked to bring a colleague from their home institution so that the event might provide a springboard for continuing discussions. Exchange of practice was a prominent part of the two days and there were also opportunities for discussion amongst what proved to be an engaged, talkative and critical group. (See [www.languageandlearning.qmul.ac.uk/wid/events](http://www.languageandlearning.qmul.ac.uk/wid/events) for details of participants, programme and presentations).

In this brief reflection on the event I want to highlight a number of issues that surfaced and resurfaced, whether in the accounts people gave of their practice and its underpinning thinking, in the more general discussions that were opened up, or in the

reflections that people sent to us after the event. One participant described our debates around these issues as "both inspiring and frustrating" and this captures something of what I felt too.

### Writing as a Problem?

One of the touchstones for the Consortium was the recently published report *Writing Matters*, which was circulated to participants before the event. As Aled Ganobschik Williams (Derby) observed, reading the report represented for many, "A moment of clarity about the general nature of the 'problem' of student writing in higher education." Peter Reddy's (Aston) review elsewhere in this newsletter unpicks this idea further: it acknowledges both that student writing often *is* a problem and that it is a problem that teachers and institutions have often failed to focus on directly, even while they address other issues that arise from it – plagiarism and assessment, for example. What Peter is remarking on is in fact what researchers have been noting for a while now – the invisibility of writing itself in the agenda and discourse of higher education teaching and learning.<sup>1</sup>

### Writing as an Opportunity?

If the RLF report represented a 'moment of clarity', however, it also caused a tangible degree of unease. For if student writing is too readily agreed upon as a problem, do we just feed an already thriving 'culture of complaint' about literacy, standards, previous schooling and young people in general? And does this consensus then prevent us from seeing writing much more positively, as an opportunity for students to express themselves, to learn and to communicate? Some at the Consortium who had been used to observing only very traditional writing practices took away from it, "Encouragement at the way people had worked out innovative, imaginative ways of developing writing in their students." (Brenda Johnston, Southampton). Others, like Hannah Bradby (Warwick), who joined the Consortium not as a 'writing specialist' but as a sociology lecturer who happens to

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Lillis, T. and Turner, J. (2001) 'Student Writing in Higher Education: contemporary confusion, traditional concerns' in *Teaching in Higher Education*, 6 (1). Also Professor Ken Hyland's inaugural lecture at the Institute of Education, 17 October 2006.

do interesting things with writing, confessed herself struck by “the anxiety about standards of student writing expressed by the participants.” Her position was a much more positive one: “I may be a deluded fool, but I have been amazed by the excitement and originality of students’ writing, if they can be persuaded to cut loose a little from worrying about what is correct.” Hannah’s feelings as well as her ideas about what is possible in student writing are echoed in Kirsteen Anderson’s piece elsewhere in this newsletter.

### **Writing to develop disciplinary identity and purpose**

The role of disciplinary enculturation in shaping one’s beliefs and attitudes towards writing was an important thread in Consortium discussions and became the direct focus of attention for the plenary session led by Jonathan Monroe (Cornell). For Phyllis Creme (UCL), this focus prompted a chain of reflective thinking, beginning with two ideas: first, that writing has different purposes in different disciplines, and second, that learning a disciplinary genre is a way of learning ‘to think like’ a disciplinary practitioner. She writes:

**“I have assumed that in asking students to write in a particular way we are asking them to take on a certain ‘writing identity’: to think or ‘practise’ differently. So, when I ask students to write reflective learning journals I hope that they will take a reflexive, autobiographical stance. But if ‘writing up’ a science experiment and writing a personal history invoke different writing identities, is this because the writer adopts a particular text type – and in the very process a different practice – or because she is thinking in such a way that almost necessarily generates that text? For example, if we ask the student to ‘use the passive voice’ do we give as the reason that this is what science looks like; or do we explain that this is a long-standing use that indicates that knowledge is separate from and more important than the subject/writer? Is it less a matter of imitating if we ask students to ‘write up’ a scientific process – where the form of the writing itself ‘imitates’ the procedures of an experiment? Or, if, as Jonathan Monroe asked us to do, we ask questions that necessarily draw out a certain kind of reflexive and autobiographical mode of writing?”**

**In these ways writing can be experienced as an integral part of academic practising. The Writing in the Disciplines approach shows us that as it is partial to neglect writing in HE, it is also partial to overly focus on writing by itself.”**

### **Whose responsibility, and how?**

If we do focus on student writing then this raises significant questions about where the responsibility for addressing the issue should lie – questions which again came in and out of focus over the two days of the Consortium. Lewis Elton (UCL) reflected on what he saw as an unhelpful set of typical relations in higher education where the onus is on students to change, where academic-related staff ‘serve’ academic staff, and where all responsibility for improvement falls to them ‘with the academics let off Scot-free’.

The Consortium sought to change this perception by highlighting the work of academics who have made writing development a central part of their curriculum design and teaching, linking it to disciplinary content, thinking and practices. It also offered different models of partnership between writing or learning development specialists and disciplinary teaching staff, and sought clarification of what their different specialisms were and how they could relate to one another. For example, on the issue of assessment, participants asked: Do discipline-based academics mark written work only for content or do they place a value on writing? If they do place a value on writing, do they make this explicit to students? If not, is it ethical for writing specialists to ask students to write in ways that the disciplinary marker does not value in the same way?

We touched upon, but did not resolve, the issue of whether there needs to be a meta-level language with which to talk about writing and if so what that might be. Jan Skillen’s (Wollongong) use of explicit meta-language to describe and teach the functioning of certain text types as part of an interventionist pedagogy delivered in partnership between language and content specialists appealed strongly to some, and much less so to others.

The difference seemed to lie partly in whether participants were seeing the goal of writing development as helping students to produce ‘better’ written products, relatively normatively defined – the emphasis here on ‘learning to write’ in order to fulfil the goals of the course or the discipline; or whether they held a differently inflected view that the possibilities for writing and its relation to learning are both more complex and more open than this means-end approach implies, with an expectation that one’s students’ writing goals may be more divergent and more diverse; or indeed whether they were taking a critical view alert to, and suspicious of, ways in which dominant beliefs and practices shape identities. The relation between these differing positions remains a topic for further discussion and to be tested out in practice.

Questions of what we know and what we believe about writing and learning are often difficult to capture in clear and rigorous ways. Both education and writing



Dr Jan Skillen, Wollongong University

development are multi-disciplinary fields, drawing both on formalised theories and on untheorised ‘common sense’ in various guises, and played out in the complex world of classrooms, lecture theatres, and assessments and exam rooms. For me, the Consortium pointed to both the strength of trying to embed a ‘writing in the disciplines’ approach within an institution, and the difficulty. On the one hand the rationale is intellectually clear when linked to improved learning and pedagogies; however, when framed by deeply held, often technicist, beliefs around language and student writing, this rationale becomes almost counter-intuitive, a struggle. The Queen Mary Consortium provided a forum for this kind of struggle to emerge and I believe it helped to build confidence around, if not definitive answers to, some key questions for individuals and institutions. Rebecca O’Rourke (Leeds) commented, “The Consortium connected our existing work and conversations to a much wider network of research and practice which will strengthen and sustain it.” I hope that this was the case for others too and that there will be future opportunities to engage in such productive conversation and exchange.

## **Queen Mary and Wollongong Collaboration**

Thinking Writing and our colleagues in the Geography department are currently collaborating with Jan Skillen to develop and trial materials following the Wollongong model. Coventry University and the Open University are also involved from the UK.

We hope that in trying this approach we will be able to throw productive critical light on what we are trying to achieve through Thinking Writing at Queen Mary (Please contact us if you’d like to know more).

# The Whole Learner: Developing Creative Intelligence

**Kirsteen Anderson, French, School  
of Modern Languages, Queen Mary**

There is an obvious crisis in higher education at present. The impact of quality assurance systems on staff and students, the increase in student numbers and the importance of the Widening Participation drive, the pressure of research on staff time and creativity – all these, I think, threaten the university as a vital space of freedom and innovation where the open exchange of ideas is guaranteed and intellectual curiosity valued. In the current era, ways of knowing are increasingly bureaucratised and technologised. Modularisation has done away with some of the depth and continuity which ‘mastering a discipline’ once implied. A kind of disembodied intelligence and knowledge continue to be prized by traditional assessment techniques and yet, more and more, the students we teach disappoint these standard expectations. So perhaps it would be better to interpret positively the symptoms of the present crisis – students who are more attuned to the electronic and digital media than to the written word, plagiarism, the loss of consensus as to what ‘knowledge’ and education are meant to be – as an invitation to re-examine the way we define and value creativity and, more precisely, what its relationship to intelligence may be.

My impression is that many of our students do not feel any meaningful connection to their own knowledge, writing or ideas. I have often been struck by the difference between Art School students mounting their Degree Shows which are open to the public and where they share a certain pride and joy in their creative output, and our own Modern Languages undergraduates who can lack a sense of ownership or an appreciation of their written work. Many, perhaps most of them, do not think of their ideas or work as creative or even ‘created’. It’s as though their individual identities are not involved in what comes out of them.

Plagiarism, for example, illustrates well the disconnection between self and product that I have just mentioned. If students lack a sense of responsibility for their writing, if they have not been helped to understand its purpose nor empowered to have confidence in their own voice and perspective, it is pretty obvious that they will borrow from somebody else. The traditional academic essay, for example, emphasises the importance of the ‘finished product’ and relies on the foundational assumption of Western Culture that there is a ‘truth’ to be found in the ‘book’. The idea of experiment, the free play of curiosity, the asking of questions which lack a clear answer, the provisional, the open-ended – these vital activities of a lively mind need to be welcomed into a learning practice that is

fertile and formally acknowledged as valuable by more flexible modes of assessment. One possible approach to the plagiarism problem is to extend the writing repertoire so that both students and staff can draw on a greater choice of writing models in which the process, not the product is valued.

In recent years with support from Thinking Writing I have been developing an approach through French Department courses at all levels, which brings together the emotions and aesthetic self as well as the rational mind in ways that I think benefit the students I teach as well as renewing my understanding and practice as a teacher. In my final year course, *Imagining Modernity*, for example, students have used writing (poems, dialogues, translations, free association, reviews, pastiches, essays) to bridge the divide between creative and critical approaches to culture, knowledge and the self. The course aims to give students a sense of *making* a body of work (creative pieces, critical texts, a learning journal and an analytical dissertation), and an awareness of responding to it through a range of senses, and through reflection, so that they can chart their own development in and through the process of writing. This is in no sense ‘dumbing-down’ or remedial. Both the External Examiner and one of the most rigorous and philosophically analytical intelligences in the French Department have been impressed with the high quality, the width and originality of the thinking at work in the dissertations produced. Making connection between action and reflection (in other words, *being a writer as well as theorising about what writers are doing*), feeling and intelligence, aesthetic and analytical response, gives students a sense of owning an idea and being responsible for it. They select what interests them, evaluate their own output, make connections between the stages of their idea’s development – there is a purpose to their writing.

I share Mary Warnock’s conviction that, “The main purpose of education is to give people the opportunity of not ever succumbing to a feeling of futility, or to the belief that they have come to the end of what is worth having.” (*Imagination*, Faber & Faber, 1976). Perhaps the survival of the university as a humane institution depends on its ability now to transform its teaching and learning structures in order to include and motivate a more diverse student body that needs to know how learning relates to life.



David Russell (Iowa State University) made two visits to Queen Mary last year as Leverhulme Visiting Professor in Writing in the Disciplines. Here he is leading a workshop with staff, part of a series covering the essentials of WID pedagogy.

As a historian of academic disciplinary writing in the US, David was interested to see how Queen Mary is achieving pedagogical and curricular innovations through a focus on discipline-based writing development. He collaborated closely with Sally Mitchell to examine problematic issues and promising areas for development.

## Writing the Self

Matthew Mauger in the School of English and Drama and Graham Thomas, Head of Key Skills and Employability, are currently collaborating on a project to develop an approach to Personal Development Planning more suited to the needs of the English and Drama undergraduate students. They write: “Probably one of the greatest challenges faced by students [...] is to make the transition from thinking and writing practice focused on the discipline to thinking and writing focused on the self.” They are exploring this challenge through a review of existing understandings of ‘personal development’ and a review of curriculum practices both here and at other institutions that can be linked to PDP. They hope through consultations with staff and students to be able to propose an appropriate model for taking forward PDP in the School. The project is funded by the Thinking Writing/Westfield Trust secondment scheme.

# Finding the Right Room for Argument

## Kelly Peake, Thinking Writing

Last year the Higher Education Academy put out a call for research into what it considered were key areas in the sector, including the first year undergraduate experience and experiences that lead to successful graduate outcomes. Thinking Writing was part of a successful bid which looked at these areas through the lens of 'argument', asking how undergraduates understand and develop argument skills in their first year at university and how these skills relate to their disciplinary learning. The year-long pilot project was led by the University of York and also included the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign. It collected data from staff and students in three disciplines, namely biology, electronic engineering and history.

It emerged from the research that argument is present in all fields but just what argument involves varies greatly both across and within disciplines, as do the terms used to describe it. Staff talk of argument being like a courtroom battle, or a 'for-against-and-state-your-own-opinion' model, an expanded explanation, or a process of entering a discussion. In terms of naming these practices, students are happy to use the term argument while staff prefer to describe what they expect as 'hypothesis-driven research', 'challenging received wisdom', and 'critical awareness' among others. These differing interpretations of how argument can/should/does work and what it is called, result in an increasingly complex picture of how it operates in each discipline. Of the three disciplines studied, argument is most explicit in history, less explicit in biology and least so in electronic engineering, but the value placed by staff and students on argument (as a way in which knowledge is contested and made) is equally strong throughout.

In history, where the link between content and form, between the interpretation of historical fact and the presentation of that interpretation, is close, both students and staff are extremely aware of the need to make arguments. In some cases, though,

this familiarity with the role of argument in history results in students replicating the style and level of argument that they learned at A-level, and having difficulty developing a sophisticated level of engagement with a topic. In biology, where lecturers see argument – or hypothesis testing or analysis – as being fundamental to scientific thinking, students are most often asked to make arguments in response to quite broad generic topics. Where this happens, students tend to see argument as being attached to the essay as a form and detached from science. In electronic engineering, students feel that it is critical to know about and use argument effectively as engineers but don't see this as being part of what they are required to do as students, despite staff attempts to include argument in a presentation skills course.

Considered together these issues suggest that to enable students to make arguments effectively and to help staff use argument as a tool to teach fundamentals of disciplinary knowledge and thinking, it is crucial to embed argument in carefully structured assignments in key content courses. When it is not embedded, students tend to see it as a waste of time and fall back on patterns of writing and learning that they acquire in their previous education. This reliance on old models of practice undermines both the aim of using argument as a tool to promote learning, and disciplinary learning itself.

### Further issues raised by the research that departments might usefully consider are:

- The importance of students graduating with skills in criticality and argument.
- The extent to which criticality and argument are *built in* as learning objectives in all, or selected, courses, rather than being a serendipitous part of an individual lecturer's approach (eg their style of interacting with students).
- Ways of finding out more about how individual lecturers develop criticality in their students, so that other lecturers and students can benefit.
- The possibility of developing clear departmental goals which show how a student might progress from the first to he third year in criticality and argument.

- The identification in degree programmes of points where students are following such a progression and the specific activities (oral, practical, written) associated with this.
- The use of oral work to develop argument/criticality: how can speaking activities relate productively to writing?
- Practices of assessment and feedback. How useful to students are generic assessment criteria which refer to argument? Do they represent an assumed rather than actual consensus about meaning and emphasis amongst staff? How do staff use feedback to help students understand assessment criteria and argument?

We would be delighted to engage further with individuals and departments on these issues. Contact Thinking Writing for further information about the research and its findings. Our thanks to all the staff and students involved.

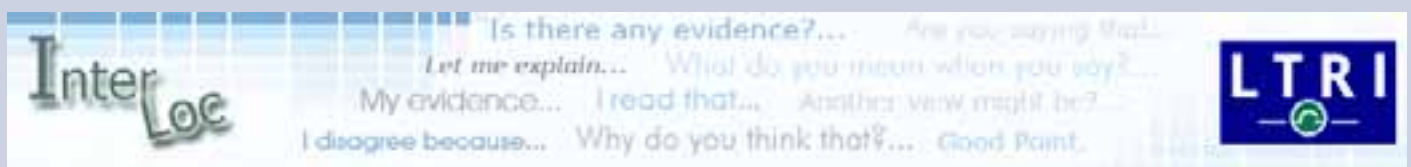
- An ESD workshop on March 1 2007, 10-12 will draw partly from the above project to consider 'The Uses of Argument' (course code A216). Please book through ESD: [www.esdcourses.org.uk](http://www.esdcourses.org.uk)



## Digital Dialogue Games – Players Sought

Queen Mary is a partner in the JISC funded project 'Cross-institutional implementation and evaluation of digital dialogue games for inclusive and personalised learning' led by the Learning Technology Research Institute at London Metropolitan University. Digital Dialogue Games support the development of academic discourse and dialogue in ways which make being intellectual inclusive and fun. See [www.interloc.org](http://www.interloc.org) for details

and a free downloadable version of the software. We are looking for opportunities to trial the games in formal, semi-formal and informal settings across the College in 2007-8. If you have courses or students who you think might benefit, please contact Thinking Writing or Sam Brenton, Head of E-Learning ([s.brenton@qmul.ac.uk](mailto:s.brenton@qmul.ac.uk)).



## Review: Writing Matters: The Royal Literary Fund Report on Student Writing in Higher Education.

**Peter Reddy, Psychology, School of Life and Health Sciences, Aston University.**

Psychology students are lively communicators from the word go. Even at open days at my university they eat all the cakes and don't stop talking. They are excited by their subject, want to communicate well and to succeed as professional psychologists. In working to improve student learning my colleagues and I have explored lots of interventions; on assessment criteria, academic skills, transition to university, mentoring and much else. I like to think that we make a difference. When I picked up *Writing Matters* I went straight to the chapter by Shahrukh Husain and Robin Waterfield, which considers 'The First Year of Higher Education'. Reading it was a revelation.

We have been round the houses with study skills, plagiarism, referencing, and the rest, identifying deficits here and there, but not attending to the central and rather obvious issue of student writing. Husain and Waterfield, writing from a uniquely outsider-but-deeply-embedded position, have no such problem. They report that most of the students attending RLF tutorials write badly or worse and find it hard to construct an argument or sometimes even a coherent sentence. Many cannot structure or manipulate their material adequately to explain their ideas, show understanding or express meaning. A few string ill-digested quotations together and some try to impress with convoluted and pompous prose that is comically wide of the mark. Husain and Waterfield pinpoint these ills afflicting many of my first year students' writing with uncanny precision. As admissions tutor I think that their views on grade-focused teaching-to-the-test at A-level are right on the nail too, as are their comments on the importance of clarity in departments' communications with students.

Davies, S, Swinburne, D and Williams, G (eds) (2006) *Writing Matters: The Royal Literary Fund Report on Student Writing in Higher Education*. London: Royal Literary Fund.

Copies of *Writing Matters* can be obtained from the RLF or from Thinking Writing. Or can be downloaded from [www.rlf.org.uk/fellowshipscheme/research.cfm](http://www.rlf.org.uk/fellowshipscheme/research.cfm)

Peter Reddy is a member of the steering group for the Write Now CETL: see [www.writenow.ac.uk/](http://www.writenow.ac.uk/)



Peter Reddy chatting to Dr Brenda Johnston (Southampton) at the QM Consortium

Husain and Waterfield may just have identified the key piece in the jigsaw of first year support for student learning. The key is student writing, and taken from a developmental and educational rather than a remedial viewpoint, as part of working towards graduate status and professional life. This is easy enough to sell to staff and students when it impacts on so much else and when entry to professional psychology depends on clear thinking and communicating. Elsewhere in *Writing Matters* there are practical ideas to support student writing and assurance that students can learn from tuition in writing and embrace it with relief.

*Writing Matters* is a set of opinion pieces to stimulate thought and debate. It is not a literature review and does not refer to research or pitch into debates about the extent to which writing support should be discipline-specific or generic. It does however bring the issue of student writing sharply into focus for me and it is wonderfully clear, concise and direct and, as you would expect, beautifully written. It has the disconcerting force of the child seeing through the Emperor's new clothes, and is all the better for it. Royal Literary Fellows have done sterling work for students as professional writers in universities, they will have achieved yet more if their embedded-outsider view of what is missing in UK higher education has the profound impact that it should. Their report certainly deserves the widest circulation in psychology.

## Writing Fellows at Queen Mary



Peter Forbes



Rahila Gupta

The Royal Literary Fund Fellows at Queen Mary offer help with writing at all levels across the college. The four Fellows – Martina Evans, Peter Forbes, Rahila Gupta and Nicholas Murray – are professional writers who are available every day of the week for consultations of 45 minutes. However, you must book. The Fellows can be found in Room 608 of the Physics Building (Sixth floor) and the booking form is on the door.



Nick Murray and Martina Evans

## Thinking Writing Postgraduate Scheme

Last academic year the Westfield Trust funded a scheme for PhD students to learn more about the principles and practices of Thinking Writing and to explore these in relation to their undergraduate teaching and their own writing. Eight students from Law, History, English, Drama, Maths and Modern Languages took part. They collectively produced a report containing a range of both generic and discipline specific ideas for writing-related teaching and learning, many of which they have tried out in their own teaching. Thinking broadly about the role of writing in curriculum development, the group made recommendations that the College should:

- Continue to promote and develop existing writing courses in order to firmly embed them within the overall curriculum
- Broaden the scope of TW initiatives by addressing the full scope of written tasks required of students in their degree programmes
- Continue to support collaboration between departmental staff, writing specialists and postgraduate students

The report was sent to Heads of Department across the College. Further copies are available from Thinking Writing.

## Recent publications on writing at Queen Mary

Burke, PJ and Dunn, S (2006) 'Communicating in Science: exploring reflexive pedagogical approaches', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 11, 2, 219-231

Mitchell, S and Evison, A (2006) 'Exploiting the Potential of Writing for Educational Change at Queen Mary, University of London' in Ganobcsik-Williams, L. (ed) *Teaching Writing in UK Higher Education: Theories, Practices, Models*. Palgrave Macmillan. 68-84.

Rash, F (2006) 'Thinking-Writing-Learning: Learning through writing at the university', *International Journal of Learning*, 11.

All available from Thinking Writing



Drama PhD student Leonore Easton discusses texts and images with her students



Will Clavering talking through a mathematical problem with a second year student. Will is studying for his PhD in the Cosmology, Relativity and Gravitational Group at Queen Mary.

**The Thinking Writing website is at:  
[www.thinkingwriting.qmul.ac.uk](http://www.thinkingwriting.qmul.ac.uk)**

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