Thinking Writing: News from the Writing in the Disciplines initiative

Spring 2005

October 2004. Discussion amongst staff involved in Thinking Writing inititiatives

Thinking Writing, which began as a HEFCE Teaching Quality Enhancement Writing in the Disciplines project in 2001, is now well established at Queen Mary. The initiative supports curriculum development by focusing on the role of writing in learning and assessment. It works with academic staff and departments to address the needs of students as they learn to write within their disciplines and to develop students who are reflective, critical and creative learners. Recognising the importance of people having a 'value commitment' to any proposed change or innovation, Thinking Writing works to generate conversation across the College about the purposes, problems and potentials of writing in higher education learning. This newsletter is a contribution to that conversation.

Writing to Learn and Writing to Communicate

The phrase 'write to learn: learn to write' was coined by the British educationalist James Britton in the 1970s. It encapsulates a key idea in the Writing across the Curriculum (WAC), Writing in the Disciplines (WID) and now, Thinking Writing, approaches. Here, **Professor Art Young** of Clemson University, Colorado explains how he understands the idea:

One way to think about the classroom uses of writing is to consider writing as a valuable tool for learning as well as for communication. If we are willing to consider making such a distinction, then we can talk about designing certain writing assignments primarily to help students learn the material of the course and other assignments to help them communicate what they have learned to others. These two purposes for assignments, which are not mutually exclusive, then guide us in two distinct ways to read and respond to student writing based on the different roles most teachers play: teacher as mentor and teacher as judge. My 'Writing and Thinking' chart may make this distinction clearer.

Look first at the left column of the chart. When a teacher designs a writing-to-learn assignment, he or she offers, as James Britton has said, an opportunity 'to explain the matter to oneself', when the 'matter' can be net ionic equations in chemistry or the Battle of Gettysburg in history. A writing-to-communicate assignment, on the other hand, challenges the student 'to explain the matter to others'. Following Britton's reasoning, we can understand the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of explaining the matter to others before you have explained it to yourself. And because writing to learn has traditionally been under-utilised in instruction, the WAC movement encourages adding 'writing to learn' to most courses for two principal purposes: firstly, students will learn the material better and secondly, this better understanding will lead to improved written communication.

I return to the left column of the 'Writing and Thinking' chart to annotate it briefly:

- **Discovery thinking:**
Writing to learn is associated with discovery writing and drafting.

- **Invention: uttered, generated:**
An early part of the writing process – make words and ideas visible so they can be examined, played with, or discarded.

- **Writer-based prose:**
Writing that usually makes sense to the writer – who is close to the language and the context – but that may not hold much meaning for others.

Writing and Thinking

Writing to Learn	Writing to Communicate
Discovery Thinking	Critical Thinking
Invention: Uttered, Generated	Revision: Crafted, Clarified
Writer-Based Prose	Reader-Based Prose
Audience: Self and Trusted Others	Audience: Distant
Personal Language in Social Community	Formal Language of Discourse Community
Teacher as a Mentor	Teacher as Evaluator
Personal Knowledge	Contextual Knowledge
Forms: Journals, Notes, Rough Drafts	Forms: Essays, Reports, Business Letters

Discovery and Critical Understanding

• Audience: self and trusted others:
Writing that may never be shown to others, as when a physicist keeps a private journal of speculations and imaginings, or that may be shown to others who can be trusted to be supportive readers – such as a teacher in the role of trusted mentor, or a reader who expects to see mistakes and incompleteness as part of the learning process (in writing, in mechanical engineering, in everything else) but who reads looking for fresh ideas and new insights in order to encourage further learning.

• Personal language in social community:
This is the language that writers have easiest access to for thinking – the language students own as they enter our classes – this is a powerful language for learning, and teachers as mentors should allow students access to it (as opposed to insisting on formal academic language in writing-to-learn assignments).

• Creative:
I associate writing to learn with right-brain activity and creative problem solving.

• Personal integration of knowledge:
Writing to learn assists in integrating new knowledge into a writer's existing system of knowledge and beliefs – a major component of 'explaining the matter to oneself'.

• Forms: journals, notes, rough drafts:
And I might add freewrites, fastwrites, one-minute essays, and other informal writings designed to encourage personal reflection and active engagement in learning.

Writing to learn privileges the learner's language and values. Writing to communicate privileges the reader's language and values. The primary goal of writing to learn is to *please the writer* by leading to new discoveries, information, perspectives. The primary goal of writing to communicate is to *please the reader* in providing new discoveries, information, perspectives. This may be a single reader, as when an employee writes a memo to a supervisor, or it may be a community of readers, as when a psychology researcher writes an article for a specialised journal in behavioural science. In each case, the writer wants to be heard and taken seriously, and the shift in purpose and audience from writing to learn makes additional demands on the writer. Let me annotate the right side of my chart for comparison's sake.

• Critical thinking:
Writing to communicate is associated with the self-conscious arranging, manipulating, and presenting of words and ideas for some rhetorical purpose (to inform a reader, to persuade a reader).

• Revision: crafted, clarified:
A later stage of writing process – sentences, ideas, thinking are clarified by being reworked.

• Reader-based prose:
Readers want to process information effectively and efficiently, and thus writers attempt to conform to reader expectations on such things as structure and conventions.

• Audience: distant:
The writer is not close to readers, who are often judgmental, so the writer must earn their reading time. Teachers read student writing critically as mentors encouraging revision, and they read student writing in their role as evaluators for how well it meets readers' expectations.

• Formal language of discourse community:
Writers enter and write the language of a community or communities – as writers move from being students of geology to becoming geologists, they learn the discourse conventions of writing and thinking as geologists do.

• Analytic:
I associate writing to communicate with left-brain activity and systematic problem-solving.

• Objective understanding of knowledge:
Writing to communicate often means integrating the writer's information or perspective into a reader's existing system of knowledge and beliefs – as when an astronomer reports the discovery of a new star to other astronomers.

• Forms; essay, reports, business letters:
And other forms designed to enhance the transfer of information from writers to readers.

At the conclusion of my 'Writing and Thinking' chart, I relate writing to learn and writing to communicate to both discovery and critical understanding because I realise that these processes are interrelated and overlapping. Certainly writers discover new ideas in the act of revision and use their creativity in performing analytic tasks. My dualistic chart is not meant to be a theoretical construct as much as a heuristic for thinking about different ways to help students write to learn and learn to write.

If James Britton is correct, then students who write discovery drafts are engaging in a productive exercise that ought to be encouraged – they are getting their ideas down so they can better craft them and understand them. But they should understand that discovery drafts are usually unsatisfactory as final drafts of writing that must conform to reasonable reader-based needs. Teachers can help students in a variety of ways to understand the processes by which scholars and researchers generate and communicate knowledge by distinguishing between these two kinds of writing, both of which are necessary and valuable to most of us.

Extracted, with permission, from Young, A 1999. *Teaching Writing Across the Curriculum*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall. The booklet is available online at: http://wac.colostate.edu/books/young_teaching/

Professor Daniel Pick (right) and Dr Matt ffytche exploring WebCT with the help of Sam Brenton (ESD, centre)

Dr Brendan Curran, Biology, with 3rd year students on the writing-intensive Integrative Studies in Biological Sciences

The Westfield Trust Secondment Scheme

Funds from Queen Mary's Westfield Trust have considerably boosted the number of initiatives to develop student writing across the College. The Trust awarded Thinking Writing £16,000 in 2003 and a further £12,000 in 2004. Individuals and departments bid for these funds mainly to buy academic staff time to develop materials, methodologies and courses that would further the twin aims of writing to learn and learning to write within the disciplines. Successful bids have resulted in 'contracts' being drawn up between Thinking Writing and academic departments. These specify aims and outcomes, methods, timelines, evaluation and dissemination activities.

Here we give a brief synopsis of each of the initiatives set in motion by the Westfield Trust scheme:

Third year chemistry students collaborating on a writing task

Handling Literature in Chemistry
Dr Christine Bladon has developed guidelines and hands-on workshops for third year undergraduate Chemistry students, to support their writing of literature reviews. She will adapt and extend the workshops for postgraduate chemists who are writing experimental reports. Contact: c.m.bladon@qmul.ac.uk

Computer Science
As part of a three-year undergraduate programme to encourage students to broaden their understanding of the subject, develop transferable skills and engage in effective personal development planning, Jane Reid and her team are developing formative, mainly online, writing activities. Students will be supported by a group of specialist tutors.
Contact: j.reid@dcs.qmul.ac.uk

Community Health Sciences
Students on the BMedSci in Community Health Sciences course have already studied three years of medicine and need rapidly to adopt a social scientific approach to knowledge and writing. Dr Hina Taylor is developing a programme of short classes linked to the students' Problem Based Learning, which raises awareness of writing issues and allows students to engage in peer review and receive detailed feedback.
Contact: h.taylor@qmul.ac.uk

Writing in Engineering
Dr Julia Shelton is developing a programme of writing activities that run from Year 1 (as part of Problem Based Learning) through to Year 3 (the final year project) and Year 4 (when MEng students produce a collaboratively written project report). Students are encouraged to use writing as a means of clarifying their thinking, as well as to understand its communicative purposes and structure.
Contact: j.shelton@qmul.ac.uk

Thinking Writing in English Studies
This refers to a new first year course collaboratively devised by Dr Catherine Maxwell and a small team of postgraduate teaching assistants. See Peter Forbes' article in this newsletter. Contact: c.h.maxwell@qmul.ac.uk

CLEAR* writing for Geography Students
The Critical Literature Evaluation and Review project is developing writing and reading exercises for integration into first, second and third year course units that will build students' understanding and abilities in these core academic activities. It is hoped that explicit attention to what is involved in reading and writing academic work will help to reduce unintentional plagiarism in students' work. Contact: David Horne: d.j.horne@qmul.ac.uk and Ray Hall: r.hall@qmul.ac.uk

Going Online in History
An online archive of primary sources has recently been developed for Professor Daniel Pick's 'Culture, Society and Transgression' course. The aim now is to explore the potential of a WebCT electronic learning environment to help students use the archive productively, learning to write at the same time as the medium requires them to write to learn. Contact: daniel.m.pick@qmul.ac.uk

Mathematical Writing
Professor Wilfrid Hodges' new writing-intensive course, Logic 1, is being strengthened this year by the development of clear and explicit assessment guidelines for each written exercise.
Contact: w.a.hodges@qmul.ac.uk

Writing-Intensive Courses in Modern Languages
Drs Jane Whetnall, Libby Saxton, Kirsteen Anderson and Felicity Rash worked last year to develop, from scratch, three new first year writing-intensive courses: Out of Africa, Mortals, Immortals and Monsters:

Dr Libby Saxton (right) writing in class with her students

Reading and writing Greek Myths, and Communication in Context. These courses are running for the first time in 2004-05. The assessment of each course varies but all students have the opportunity to write in a variety of ways for a variety of purposes. They also have the opportunity to review each others' work and to redraft material after feedback. Contact:
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The Politics Final Year Project – Best Practice in Supervision and Assessment
Dr Judith Bara is coordinating a revised approach to supervision and support that makes writing an integral part of the research process in the third year (in part via continuous assessment) and which builds from existing writing-intensive work in years 1 and 2. Postgraduate teaching assistants are taking the role of mentors in small group workshops where students will offer critical comment on their own and each other's work. Contact:
j.l.bara@qmul.ac.uk

Making The Grade at A-level

In April 2004 we invited **Simon Tombs,** an A-level Psychology teacher from Eggbuckland Community College in Plymouth, to lead a workshop looking at the ways in which argument, analysis and evaluation are understood at A-level and at how these concepts might be developed in classroom activities. Simon's design of clear, small-scale, often in-class, written tasks provided a valuable example of a writing-intensive approach in action, albeit within the pressurised constraints of A-level teaching. Here, he reflects on tensions at A-level between creative teaching, reflective learning and meeting examiners' requirements, and considers the potential for change in the recent Tomlinson report on the 14-19 curriculum.

Going into a higher education institution after a number of years' absence was a daunting experience. It felt very different from the world of schools and colleges to which I am accustomed. I needed to remind myself that crossing the divide between these two worlds is something which we ask many thousands of students to do every year. The key question is how well experiences of one system prepare students for the other and the disquieting thought is that A-level study, as currently constituted, is a poor preparation for study in Higher Education.

The common allegation about A-level is that the curriculum has been 'dumbed down'. This wasn't quite how it looked from the perspective of people working at the next level up. Subject matter appears to be complex and its demands rigorous. The problem seems to be that although aspirations are high, and many more students than ten years ago are able to make the grade in the sense that what they write down in an exam room fulfils the subject's examination criteria, something has been lost at our end that means that the academic lives of our students are less rewarding than they might be.

Those attending the workshop were surprised at the amount of content we cover at A-level. More significantly, they were surprised by the level of complexity required in students' writing and by the amount they were expected to write under exam conditions. Twenty words per minute seemed like an awful lot! But one of their comments on the work I showed them was that although there was a clear connection between the evaluation activities with which the students were presented, and the written assignments they would be asked to do, it was a forced process where students were being driven towards the right answer without time to reflect for themselves on the points they had encountered or to develop an internal model of the material. As a result, what matters is that students have produced something that looks like an academic essay, even if they have not fully analysed or internalised what they have written.

My defence was that pressure of time currently drives us at A-level from one gobbet of subject matter to the next. The assumption when I was at school was that the teachers represented an establishment one had to impress in order to succeed. They were the gamekeepers; we were the poachers. Now I work on the assumption that I am on the side of the poachers, giving students more tips on how to bag more marks from 'the examiners'.

My reading of the recent Tomlinson report suggests that this unhelpful situation may change, however, giving us back a dual role as facilitators of learning and guardians of standards. Many university teachers, it seems, are fortunate in retaining this. They are generally able to dictate the amount of content covered in a course unit and are able to control assessment procedures. So for example, if a department wants to move away from the standard essay as a means of assessment to include a portfolio of smaller scale, ongoing writing tasks, they are able to do so within minimal bureaucratic constraints. Whether the current political climate will allow schools freedom to decide content, though, is a moot point.

Tomlinson's report has a lot to say about stretching students to prepare them better for higher education. There is much pressure – perhaps too much pressure – on students at A-level to play safe. They are faced with an exam system with a range of content that is vast when compared with what they are used to at GCSE, and where the demands of thinking on your feet and writing quickly are simply too much. In term-time written assignments, students focus on getting the job done and including the basics rather than taking the time to develop ideas and interpretations. There is no incentive to take risks but taking risks is what they need to do if they are to move themselves on and enter Higher Education in a fit state to derive most benefit from it.

Tomlinson envisages students working on personal projects to develop higher level thinking and research skills and I guess this is where more risk-taking could take place. It looks as though exams may be pitched differently too; cutting content and demanding greater depth in what is examined.

One of the chief benefits of the discussions at Queen Mary was to think more about how I could give students more space to reflect. One of the consequences of this, although it was certainly driven by other factors as well, was that I worked with a colleague to create a web-based project for students to do in the two or three weeks after they finished their AS exams. We were really pleased with the results – they had to make presentations based on the proposition 'There has never been a better time to study Psychology'. What we noted was that higher order concepts, which we struggle to teach students during regular lessons, seemed to come very easily in this format. It's this kind of work that Tomlinson is expecting to see more of. It'll be interesting to see how many of his proposals turn up in the Government White Paper, due out in February.

Simon Tombs introducing the ideas behind his workshop

Simon's materials offer useful models for developing students' analytical, evaluative and argumentative abilities. If you'd like to look through them contact Thinking Writing. A summary for HEIs of the Tomlinson report can be downloaded from http://www.14-19reform.gov.uk

The Silent Sparring Partner: Thinking Writing in English Studies

Peter Forbes, Royal Literary Fund Fellow

For too long, writing was to university studies what electricity is to computing – you can't have the one without the other and the more basic commodity is assumed to be there on tap when you need it. But the centrality of the discipline of writing to all forms of study, including even those that appear to be dominated by other forms of symbolisation such as the sciences and mathematics, is increasingly recognised. A better grasp of how to construct meaning in language makes all forms of study easier.

Queen Mary recognises this in various programmes, especially in the Thinking Writing initiative. One product of Thinking Writing is a new compulsory module in the First Year English course, introduced this term. Thinking Writing in English Studies was devised by Dr Catherine Maxwell, in collaboration with Sally Mitchell (TW coordinator).

Thinking Writing in English Studies covers every aspect from information gathering, use of sources and avoidance of the plagiarism, to vocabulary and the basic ingredients like punctuation (too often regarded as optional seasoning). The classes are especially linked to two major first year courses: Shakespeare and Reading Theory Interpretation. The groups are small – four to eight students – so this is a workshop rather than a class, with all the advantages of more individual attention.

Amber Laine

The course is taught by a team of Teaching Assistants, and one of them, Amber Laine, a Californian from San Diego, researching a PhD on the memoir with particular reference to sexuality, talked me through the progress of the course so far.

Amber has an exuberant love of scholarship that must surely be catching. She is very happy to be teaching first years 'because I enjoyed my own classes' and she wants to pass something on. She believes that London is the best city in the world for students – the fabulous libraries, the amenities, the multi-ethnic fabric of life. And within this milieu, Queen Mary's English Department is notable for its multidisciplinary approach, embracing post-colonialism, feminism, cultural history and historicism.

Students can often find the many voices of texts and their commentaries tricky to negotiate. In Thinking Writing in English Studies, a powerful passage, the Shakespeare's sister episode in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own,* is used with two critical texts for comparison: Michele Barrett's introduction to the Penguin *A Room of One's Own* (Michele Barrett is Director of Graduate Studies in the School of English and Drama) and an Internet source. One strong text and two critiques. Amber Laine says that the purpose of such comparisons is to encourage the student to develop a 'dialogue with a silent source, a silent sparing partner. You don't want to let your side down.'

Amber stresses that the core skills taught in Thinking Writing – summary, techniques of argument, uses of critical sources (including avoidance of plagiarism), use of dictionaries, spellcheckers and thesauruses, punctuation – are the language skills that are needed whatever field a student eventually works in. They are essential to a career in English studies but also to pretty well any job you can imagine. To have a fully thought out course of this kind at the beginning of a university course in English makes enormous sense.

This is Thinking Writing in English Studies' first year but, as Amber Laine says, such courses are normal practice in the USA. It is one of several programmes that run alongside the core teaching and add an extra dimension, what I like to think of as stereo vision, to the School of English and Drama. One other programme is PASS, in which first-year students can have their work peer-reviewed by third years. And the final programme is my own reason for being at Queen Mary, the Royal Literary Fund Fellowship. The three Fellows – myself, Nicholas Murray and Martina Evans – offer one-to-one consultations to anyone who requests it, at any level.

All of these programmes encourage the development of that 'silent sparring partner', the internal critic who rings the bell every time an argument fails to land cleanly, and who has interiorised the expertise needed to redirect the blow. Thinking Writing packs a punch!

Dr Catherine Maxwell (SED) and Dr Tory Young (Speak-Write Programme at APU) working together at a TW workshop led by Professor Rob Pope from Oxford Brookes University

Dr Bronwen Ress (APU), Dr Peter Ovens (Nottingham Trent) and Professor Richard Winter (APU) came to Queen Mary to share their work on 'Patchwork Texts'. See *Innovations in Education and Teaching International,* 40 (2), May 2003.

The RLF Fellows are available to writers in any discipline at Queen Mary. Appointments can be made by contacting Julie Sheehan: j.sheehan@qmul.ac.uk

Left to right: Dr Colleen McKenna (UCL), Dr Phyllis Creme (UCL) and Sally Mitchell at WAC 2004 in St. Louis, Missouri

Review: A Handbook For Deterring Plagiarism in Higher Education by Jude Carroll

David Horne (Geography)

In the past year or two I have read several articles (eg MacLeod, 2004) about the increasing incidence of plagiarism by university students and how to detect and deal with it.

My own experience and discussions with colleagues have made me aware that detecting a single case of plagiarism, proving it and dealing with the repercussions (including appeals and even legal action) is time-consuming and stressful, possibly leading to a reluctance on the part of academics to pursue such cases in the future. I think it is important to maintain a sense of proportion and resist the assumption that all students are deliberate plagiarists unless prevented.

Jude Carroll rightly puts the emphasis on how to deter plagiarism, pointing out that this is far more effective in terms of time-management and outcome, although her handbook also covers ways of identifying and reacting to it. She begins by reviewing issues such as defining plagiarism, how widespread it is in higher education, students' motivations for doing it, and the use of the web/Internet. Early chapters cover such topics as the (re)design of courses and assessments so as to deter plagiarism, ways of educating students (and fellow academics) about plagiarism, and the teaching of writing skills.

Only later in the book do we encounter substantial discussion of detection and punishment, and the final chapter covers institutional policy and culture. There are exercises designed to 'engage staff and students in creating and confirming assumptions about plagiarism', as well as a bibliography and an annotated list of paper and electronic resources.

Jude Carroll suggests starting by reading the first chapter, and then dipping into the rest of the book as and when it seems appropriate; I will use it in this way, but actually I found it enjoyable, stimulating and often amusing to read right through, tending to come across examples or advice and think 'Yes, I do that' or 'I have done that but didn't realise it could be effective in this context' and (perhaps more often) 'That seems like a good idea, maybe I'll try that.'

I found very little to disagree with, but in one or two instances I thought a suggested course of action might clash with institutional requirements. As one means of ensuring that an assessed coursework essay is a student's own work (and not, say, downloaded 'complete' from the Internet), for example, she suggests assessing the process as well as the product, perhaps by requiring students to provide and discuss an early draft of the work. I think this is good practice that improves essays and only slightly increases the amount of time spent on assessment, but if you adopt it, you may have trouble complying with a departmental policy of anonymous marking. Points like this serve to underline the need for comprehensive and integrative engagement with the issues of plagiarism, as opposed to a simple 'catch and cure' approach.

I will certainly buy this handbook (if I don't get away with forgetting that the review copy was a loan) and use it. I strongly recommend it to all academics who teach, assess or administrate university courses; perhaps, at least, every departmental office should have a reference copy (on a chain).

Carroll, J, 2002, *A Handbook For Deterring Plagiarism in Higher Education.* Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development, ISBN 1-873576-56-0

MacLeod, D, 2004. 'Looks familiar: The fight against student plagiarism must become ever more sophisticated'. *Education Guardian,* 22 June 2004, p24.

Conferences

A number of Queen Mary staff attended conferences in 2004 to talk about their Thinking Writing work and find out more about writing and language pedagogy.

Julia Shelton (Engineering) and Sally Mitchell spoke about progress in the 'Writing in Engineering' programme at the Writing Development in Higher Education conference at Sheffield Hallam University in May. Also in May, Sally Mitchell, Alan Evison (LDU) and Catherine Maxwell (SED) attended the WAC 2004 conference in St, Louis, Missouri. Catherine gave a paper on 'Teaching 19th Century Aesthetic Prose: A writing-intensive course'. Sally co-presented with colleagues from UCL, Colleen McKenna and Phyllis Crème, on the blends in their work between UK and US approaches to writing.

Finally in June, Kirsteen Anderson and Felicity Rash (SML) went to Havana, Cuba to lead a workshop, based on their course development work, at the 11th International Literacy and Education Research Network.

A major writing conference in 2005 will be the 3rd Conference of the European Association for the Teaching of Academic Writing (EATAW) in Athens 22-24 June. Details can be found at http://eataw2005.hau.gr/

The Thinking Writing website is at: www.thinkingwriting.qmul.ac.uk

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