

Spring 2009 **Thinking Writing:** Writing Development in the Disciplines

Over the last year at Queen Mary a number of important conversations have been taking place focussing on the writing that our students do and the ways in which departments and central services value and support that writing. These discussions form the basis for continuing thinking and consultation about what we as an institution can do to value and develop our students' capacities as highly literate, confident and effective communicators.

This edition of the Thinking Writing newsletter gives a snapshot of what has been said about writing development in the disciplines. It sets out some ideas for future development and points to ways in which departments, groups and individuals can bid to Thinking Writing for funds to support their work in 2009 and 2010.



Consultations with departments

The impetus for discussions over the past year came from a number of directions: Queen Mary's Student Support Strategy 2008-10 which focuses on 'improving and supporting the student experience'; the external evaluation of Thinking Writing carried out by Professor Brian Street and colleagues from King's College, London; and the College's participation in a Higher Education Academy programme 'Embedding Inclusive Policies and Practices'.

Queen Mary's focus within this programme was on issues of student writing development within the context of widening participation. A team was formed comprising Dave Horne (from Geography), Kirsteen Anderson (SLLF), Alan Evison, Margaret Percy and Sally Mitchell (LLU), Ben Kotzee (ESD), and Morag Shiach (VP for Teaching and Learning). Together we conducted consultations with departments across the College, spoke to students, and took stock of what a range of central services were offering in the way of writing development and support.

Writing and Learning

Participants in the consultations almost universally placed high value on writing as a means by which students actively engage with and develop disciplinary thinking. Writing was described in highly discipline-specific ways and it was recognised that students' learning to write in these ways was a strong measure of their learning overall. In some subjects highly specific writing practices emerged from sub-disciplinary forms of reasoning: in Law, for example, students need both to exercise clear legal reasoning and to engage in general evaluative arguments about topics such as jurisprudence; in Politics, a different kind of writing is evinced by abstract theoretical arguments on the one hand and by arguments which integrate theory and empirical data on the other. Students who are good at one sort of writing are not necessarily good at the other. In this sense, writing is not at all regarded as a transferable or add-on skill, but as a mode of thinking and belonging in very particular disciplinary fields.

Students we spoke to were also highly aware of the course-specific demands of writing. When teaching staff talked about students, however, they noted attitudinal and disciplinary differences: some students were described as being fond of writing and as accepting of it as a disciplinary practice; others as resentful, seeing writing as unconnected to knowledge construction in their discipline. A similar distinction seemed possible to apply to disciplinary staff.

Participants commented:

- Writing is a fundamental part of the learning process – it takes students deeper into the material; it's the way in which they become really engaged with arguments and evidence (Geography)
- Students comment on the unexpected depth required in their thinking once forced to offer verbal explanations (Maths)
- Writing short explanatory reports shows whether the students have understood what they have been taught, shows the limits of their understanding (Computer Science)
- Writing focuses the student in depth on a subject or area of thinking and allows them to develop argumentative skills (Politics)
- Writing, thinking and learning are intimately connected (Languages, Linguistics and Film)
- Writing reveals clarity of thought. If thought isn't clear you can't write clearly. There's a connection (Engineering)

Whilst some regarded writing as part of the challenge of teaching and as integral to both their discipline and their overall work with students, others saw fewer connections between writing and their subject, and questioned whether their course structures and teaching practices encouraged students to develop as writers.

Writing and Teaching

Teaching staff were often self-questioning about the way they taught or how courses and assessments affected their students' ability to write well and there were plentiful examples of where individuals and departments are developing their students' writing in interesting, imaginative and apparently effective ways. A number of these singled out writing for explicit pedagogical attention (particularly at first year level), but other instances came to light where writing was simply a part of a larger educational experience from which it derived its purpose and meaning. Such instances were a reminder that the motivation to write and write well often comes not from being taught how to write (on a 'writing course' for example) but from having something you want genuinely to communicate and then having to solve the problem that communication poses.

We asked a group of colleagues to produce a Utopian vision for writing at the university and Simon Carr (Geography) produced the image above right. He feels his students achieve something of this Wow, How, Now engagement with their writing when they do field research in the extreme environment of Iceland, understanding, sometimes for the first time, why the conventions of research writing are important in building communities of knowledge. Others, in thinking about their Utopia, talked about ownership, motivation, enthusiasm, confidence, self-belief,

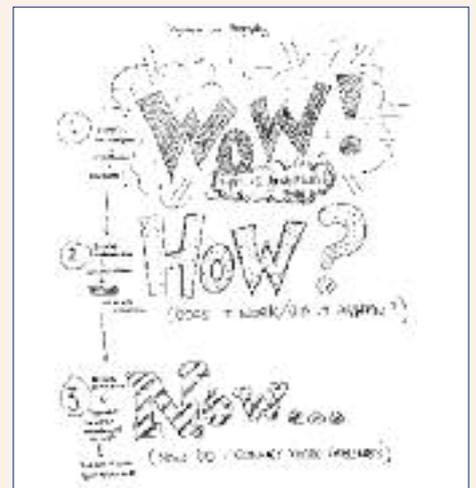
Participants commented:

We need to realise that contemporary students often learn in a variety of ways that differ from how we ourselves learnt

Before we say our students can't write, should we question whether they are given enough opportunities to write?

Recognising that our students often have ability but are unmotivated, do we set our expectations and standards high enough?

imagination and determination. Thomas Dixon (History) commented: 'There is much more we could do...' and his recent overhaul of History's 6 week disciplinary induction course reflects this ambition by enlisting some of the department's most inspirational academics to lecture and lead classes and by placing strong emphasis on developing stylish and engaging historical writing.



Changing Practices: examples from departments

Placing the assessment deadline at the end of the holiday rather than the end of term meant that the writing task was disengaged from the learning process. We therefore moved the deadline earlier and supported students' writing process in classes. (Drama)

When we reviewed our programme we identified that opportunities to practice and receive support for writing diminished considerably in the second year, leaving students ill-equipped for the big writing tasks required of them in the third year. We're beginning to address this by introducing supported writing tasks throughout second year courses. (Engineering)

We've developed a standardised form with criteria that relate to marking and also space for commentary. It is an attempt to be more rigorous and use clear, plainer English. Students prefer it to just written feedback. In future all feedback will be recorded on WebCT, so that it can be referred to in personal development planning. (Film)

Assessment and Feedback

Writing is the major form of assessment in most departments, yet the consultations suggested great variation in assessment and feedback practices. Amongst those we spoke to there was some uncertainty about minimum standards of writing and a range of views on whether the quality of writing itself was assessed, with some departments and individuals more willing to overlook problematic writing than others. It was also a matter of individual practices and beliefs as to whether spelling and grammar were considered in assessment and made the subject of feedback to the student.

Although teaching staff we spoke to recognised giving feedback as a crucial part of developing students' writing, they were conscious of how far large student numbers and lack of time hampered them from doing this well. Some felt that assessment itself undercut the value of feedback by directing students' attention towards grades rather than areas for reflection and improvement.

The enthusiasm of teaching staff for developing their students' disciplinary writing was also often accompanied by a significant caveat – a point where some student writing made them feel so frustrated, and sometimes helpless, that their sense of responsibility for developing writing ended. Tackling such problems they said, or reported their colleagues as saying, was not part of their professional role. When we asked for clarification as to the nature of the problems it was clear that these extended across a broad range and were often complexly interrelated: basic language issues merged with issues of genre and discourse, with deficiencies in study skills as well as factors relating to attitude, understanding and epistemological belief.

Participants commented:

If the communication is competent – 'works' – then the quality of writing at the sentence level is not picked up on and is not assessed.

Separating out quality of expression from ideas is doing something artificial; but sometimes I do a lot of 'reading between the lines' to find the thinking the student is capable of.

There is little coherence: students just write what comes into their mind. As a teacher, I don't know what to say to students about this.

Getting more support

Some academic departments reported seeking help from central services, sending students to the Royal Literary Fund Fellows or to the Language and Learning Unit, but the referrals were not formal or systematically followed up. One exception was 'English for Biologists', a first year 'catch-up' course provided by the LLU, timetabled and strictly monitored in conjunction with the students' home department.

Generally there was a desire to explore strategies and resources that would allow departments to make more productive use of the expertise of writing specialists located in the LLU, the Library and the Disability and Dyslexia Service, for example. When asked what kind of support they might like to develop, teaching staff generally favoured options geared to their particular students and courses. Students we spoke to were similarly wary of support that was outside

of the curriculum; for them writing was best supported by feedback from a tutor or in small groups, and by opportunities to practise. At the same time, they acknowledged that 'everyone knows someone who is struggling because of their writing' and wanted to see lecturers taking an active role in getting those students help.

Current Writing Support for Students

Tutorials

Students of any level or discipline can benefit from one-to-one tutorials of up to 45 minutes offered by either LLU writing teachers or Royal Literary Fund Fellows: www.languageandlearning.qmul.ac.uk/elss/study/tutorials.htm

Study Stress Support

Advice and Counselling offer workshops dealing with procrastination and exam anxiety, as well as weekly study stress drop-in sessions: www.welfare.qmul.ac.uk/psychology/index.html

Academic English and Study Workshops and Courses

Options range from five week courses on, for example, the process of writing and structuring an argument, to two hour stand-alone workshops on particular aspects of grammar, as well as time management and exam techniques: www.languageandlearning.qmul.ac.uk/elss/index.html

Dyslexia Screening and Support

<http://www.dds.qmul.ac.uk/dyslexia/index.html>

Questions for Consideration

- How do I regard writing? As a skill that is separate from thinking and content? As part of the way thinking and knowledge is constructed in my field? As both?
- If a course gives time to developing writing does that in some way compete with covering content?
- Is the way I react to writing a reflection of my individual beliefs; or is it a reflection of professional practices in my discipline; or is it a departmental approach?
- Am I clear what constitutes competent and good writing in my department and my subject? Are the students clear? How do I know?
- In what ways does the department encourage students to be active, engaged writers and readers? Do any of our practices encourage the opposite tendency?

- Is there a clear approach to setting writing tasks and assessment practices across the department? Do later courses build on writing skills developed in previous years? Are ideas and practices shared?
- Do I know where students might get extra help with writing and learning issues?

A Manifesto for Writing?

How far would you agree with a proposal for all students to have the following opportunities in their degree programmes?:

To use writing for learning: for example as a way of engaging with their prior learning or disciplinary content, whether to raise questions, explore connections, explain a concept or process, or argue a position

Through reading, writing and explicit instruction, to learn about typical structures, modes of reasoning, styles of address and social functions of texts in their subject area, and where appropriate to critique and adapt them

To develop rhetorical flexibility by writing in a range of genres for different audiences and purposes

To publish (make public) their writing for interested readers who may be other students, academics, employers or members of the wider community

To receive and respond to timely feedback from readers based where appropriate on clear criteria. Readers may be peers as well as teachers, employers, professionals in the field

To develop their writing – and their confidence as writers – through revision and practice and through educational experiences through their programmes of study that are motivating and give writing an authentic purpose



Towards a strategic approach to writing development

A College Working Group on Developing Student Writing

At its meeting on 29 October 2008, the College's Learning, Teaching and Assessment Committee agreed to establish a working group to facilitate a strategic approach to the development of students' writing. The work of this group is intended to inform the new Learning and Teaching Strategy, the development of QM 'graduate attributes', and the implementation of the Student Support Strategy 2008-10.

If you would like to contribute your views or experiences to the group, please contact Sally Mitchell (secretary) or Jane Reid (Chair).

Funding opportunities

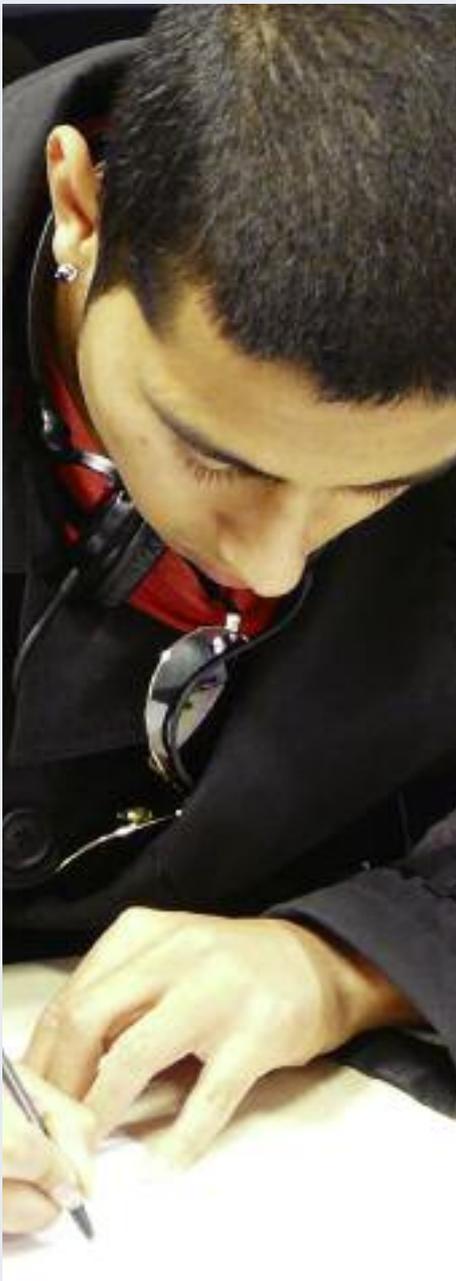
The table below summarises aspects of what the consultations and reviews over the last year have suggested and identifies some aims to work towards. It then indicates a range of Thinking Writing-supported opportunities to take forward these aims. Please see <http://qm-web.languageandlearning.qmul.ac.uk/collegestaff/index.html> or contact Thinking Writing.



Dr Irene Clark of California State University, Northridge (centre) visited Queen Mary in 2007 as a Fulbright Senior Specialist and led a four week course helping to prepare postgraduate teaching assistants in the Humanities to support student writing. Dr Clark is returning to QMUL in April and May 2009 and will run the course again. See below.

Aspects of the situation at Queen Mary	Some Guiding Principles	Opportunities For Development And Funding in 2009 And 2010 ¹
<p>Writing is regarded a central part of students' work in almost all disciplines. What staff want students to achieve in writing closely matches what they want them to achieve in terms of sophistication of thinking and knowledge.</p> <p>There are numerous examples of interesting and effective practice around writing, but the number of practitioners actively engaged in developing student writing is still relatively small</p> <p>Writing is the major form of assessment, but practices in assessment and feedback on writing vary and there is uncertainty about whether writing itself is assessed or developed.</p> <p>Writing and literacy practices have a significant impact on students' success at University, but a sizeable minority of students are recognised/reported as having difficulties in this area</p> <p>Staff see students' writing as needing to develop over degree programmes but at a departmental level are not always clear about how this takes place and where it is supported through learning experiences.</p> <p>Support for and expertise in student writing is available in a number of places across the College but these are not well known about or coordinated. Academic departments and central services often do not work together.</p>	<p>CREATE VALUE Publically celebrate student achievement in writing in the disciplines and make excellent written communication a goal for all students</p> <p>ENHANCE PRACTICE Provide opportunities for all staff to discuss current approaches and to develop new thinking and practices</p> <p>Recognise, support and value staff's work</p> <p>Show how writing issues are integral to many other concerns in education</p> <p>ENABLE STUDENTS TO PROGRESS Ensure that degree programmes progressively support the development of advanced disciplinary literacy</p> <p>COORDINATE RESOURCES Find new ways for academic departments and central services to work together</p>	<p>STUDENT PUBLICATION PROJECTS to celebrate the expertise, style and passion that disciplinary writing can display. We are seeking expressions of interest in this idea. Please get in touch if you have views or expertise to share.</p> <p>TW EXCHANGE OF PRACTICE FORUM: opportunities to hear from colleagues at QM and beyond about what they do and about theoretical ideas that can inform our practice.</p> <p>DEPARTMENTAL WORKING GROUP SCHEME to develop thinking and practice around issues (perhaps thrown up by the NSS) relating to student writing development, for example, assessment and feedback, course design, programme mapping. Funds available for awaydays, speakers etc..</p> <p>PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SECONDMENTS to support individuals in academic departments to develop their expertise in the areas relating to the development of students' writing: for example, course and assignment design, pedagogy, assessment, feedback and support.</p> <p>ASSESSMENT & FEEDBACK IN LARGE GROUPS PROJECT A cross-departmental project looking at strategies for managing writing tasks in large groups.</p> <p>GIVING EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK ON STUDENT WRITING: a course for disciplinary staff exploring theoretical frameworks and practical techniques for feedback on writing.</p> <p>HELPING STUDENTS WRITE EFFECTIVELY: A four week course for Teaching Assistants in the Humanities and Social Sciences, led by Dr Irene Clark. Stipend payable for attendance and report.</p>

¹ TW funds come via ESD from an allocation of the College's Teaching Quality Enhancement Funds. 2008-9 is the last year of this funding.



Encouraging innovative student writing: the Simon Tavana Writing Prize in Human Geography

Alastair Owens and David Pinder

The Simon Tavana Writing Prize is awarded on an annual basis to a final year undergraduate student who has produced a piece of human geography coursework that is marked by an original and innovative writing style. The prize was established in 2005 in conjunction with the parents of Simon Tavana, a former human geography student who was tragically killed in a car accident shortly after his graduation in 2004. Simon had a passion for writing creatively. His written work was characterised by a restless energy and a willingness to pursue bold lines of argument in an uncompromising but thoughtful way. It was his plan to pursue creative and journalistic writing at postgraduate level.

Simon's work was a pleasure to read because of its enthusiastic and creative engagement with the intellectual arguments and themes at the heart of our discipline. Yet, it was his willingness to find a voice that could engage with, but also step beyond, the conventions of academic writing, that particularly inspired. In this way, his work was unusual. The endowment of a prize in Simon's memory has enabled staff in the Department of Geography

to think more about how we value and encourage good student writing. Up until that point, interest in the ways that students write had largely focused on how we might support weaker students who struggle with academic writing. The Simon Tavana Prize has prompted staff to focus on how we inspire and give confidence to students wishing to experiment with and develop their writing skills. As an academic discipline human geography has itself experimented with different ways of writing and presenting its ideas, arguments and empirical materials in recent years; the prize has enabled us to encourage students to explore and engage with these new forms of geographical practice.

Essays and coursepapers shortlisted for the prize are nominated by the academic staff who convene final year modules. The criteria for nominating and awarding the prize (see box) are flexible and particular emphasis is placed upon the nature and quality of the writing. While this often goes hand-in-hand with academic content, the highest graded pieces of work are not necessarily the ones most eligible for the prize. The work is read by two members of staff in the department, a colleague from the College's 'Thinking Writing' team and Simon's parents.

Shortlisted and winning pieces of work have already demonstrated the range of ways in which students are willing to experiment with different styles of writing to explore issues that have substantive geographical meaning. Questions of labour migration and diasporic identity were explored by Toni Sekinah Peters through an essay that focused on a single life history, derived from carrying out an in depth interview. An extract follows:

“ Years went by and the emigrants came back from England and gave their opinions of the experience to their family, friends and neighbours. “Some people talking good, some people talking bad.” Linda deliberated. Her circumstances had changed. She had married Hamilton Peters at the age of 19 in 1947 (in a lavish ceremony in the island's Catholic cathedral, she hastens to add). She gave birth to her first child in the same year and bore six more children during the following ten years, four of whom survived. Her mother had aged and had become frailer. She was concerned that something might happen to her mother if she went away. But a friend of hers, Dora Simon, had just returned and said to her, “Girl, if you get the chance to go to England you would do very well”.

Criteria for awarding prize

Convenors of all third year modules in human geography are invited to nominate one piece of written coursework, submitted as part of the assessment for the module, that is:

- distinguished by an overall high quality of writing;
- marked by a creative and imaginative written engagement with its subject material in any of the following ways:
 - by demonstrating a willingness to experiment with language and writing style, resulting in a piece of work that stands out from the norm, but which is successful in conveying ideas and arguments;
 - by dealing with geographical argument and debate in an incisive and innovative fashion;
 - by presenting empirical material and case study examples in a novel and inventive way;
 - by offering a sustained, passionate and vigorous intellectual, political or theoretical argument.

The nominated essay will not necessarily be the highest scoring assessment of the group, but rather one that stands out in terms of the above criteria.

'All uncaptioned photographs were taken in a Masters in Engineering class focussing on the group research project, led by Henri Huijberts and Tina Chowdury with TW support, October 2008.



Passages like this were interwoven with others written in a more conventional academic manner which drew upon social science literatures to describe the post-war context to migration. Inventive, confident and invoking a style reminiscent of much recent fictional work on these themes, the essay provided a persuasive account that moved between the personal and the academic, the anecdotal and the political.

The 2008 winner, Christopher Coffey, wrote a brilliant essay on the urban flâneur (a literary figure who wanders through the spaces and attempts to make sense of the sights, sounds and experiences of the 'modern' city). The essay perambulates through some of the flâneur's familiar haunts – the arcades of nineteenth-century Paris and the streets of Victorian London – but drawing upon a range of literary theory and geographical scholarship, it offers a clever critique of the contemporary relevance of flânerie in a more commodified world:

“ The modern hero is now a super hero, because the flâneur is not on the margins anymore, voyeurism is everywhere. One could argue that virtually every transaction in the 21st century has flânerie in mind from food, to tourism to clothes. People want to be at ‘the intersection of the experience of modernity’, and postmodernism has fragmented these intersections into bite-sized morsels. ”

Poetic and witty, Christopher's writing revealed a mature and confident use of language and a subtle appreciation of the fluid and playful ways that accounts of modernity – both classical and contemporary – have themselves worked creatively with words to conjure up the contradictory fears and pleasures of metropolitan life. The Simon Tavana Writing Prize has proved enormously valuable in recognising and celebrating these and other remarkable writing achievements of our students.

Recent articles of interest:

Phyllis Crème (2008)

'A Space for Academic Play: Student learning journals as transitional writing' in *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, Vol 7(1) 49-64.

Phyllis Crème has spoken at Queen Mary about her research into the use of journals on courses in Anthropology; here she draws on the ideas of Winnicott, Britton and Bruner to explore written forms that foster a spirit of enquiry and 'an ability and willingness to play seriously and sustainedly'

Peter Medway (2008)

'The Groves of Academe and the 'edgerows of Experience' in *Changing English*, Vol 15 (2) 119-136.

Peter has developed concluding remarks he made at the 2006 Queen Mary Consortium for Writing in the Disciplines. He speculates on the intellectual, political and rhetorical achievements of Ernest Bevin who received little formal education and asks what lessons might be learnt from Bevin's narrative for efforts to engage all students in meaningful intellectual activity within systems of organised discipline-based education.



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For general information please visit:

www.thinkingwriting.qmul.ac.uk

For internal opportunities visit:

<http://qm-web.languageandlearning.qmul.ac.uk/collegestaff/index.html>

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. Thinking Writing provides principled practical support for course and assignment development, including assessment and feedback.