

## CHAPTER 31

# A CAUTIONARY TALE ABOUT A WRITING COURSE FOR SCHOOLS

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*... in which two optimistic writing developers seek to work with students to develop their writing, and find themselves thwarted by myriad conundrums, unknowns and disappointments, until finally they abandon their efforts and rethink their position ...*

On and off over the last four years, we<sup>1</sup> have been working on various writing development projects with sixth form<sup>2</sup> students from local schools as part of our university's outreach and access programme which aims to encourage and enable students across its neighbouring communities to go on to higher education. Our remit within this programme was to focus on students' problems with academic writing. The core of our work with schools began as a "writing course." Since its first iteration we have changed the course significantly, relocating it from inviting students from multiple schools to our university campus to going to teach students from a single school in their own setting, and also refocusing it in terms of content. Our initial approach sought to draw students' attention to the features of writing that are often valued at university level, experimenting with types of texts, then linking these to writing students brought with them from school. Then as we became familiar with the students' writing, we began to hone our approach to draw on Language Awareness (Rod Bolitho et al., 2003; Leo van Lier, 1995) and to focus largely on the linguistic expression of, and linking between, ideas in written texts. We felt that it was here that the students often had fewest resources, and that without these resources they were unable to participate fully in the "types of text" activities we had first offered them.

Although the funding context which initiated our work has changed, the university where we work remains committed to widening participation. The course too, in its various forms, remains part of what the university is happy to offer; it is, moreover, "an offer" that schools are happy to take up. At face value, therefore, we have been successful in our attempt to work with writing in schools; schools are keen to invite us in and we have had positive feedback on the materials we have developed. Nonetheless what we are doing with this course continues, despite the changes we have made, to strike us as a flawed approach to writing development in schools (and,

indeed, more widely). In this paper—which we think of as a cautionary tale—we explore our thinking around these flaws. To ground our discussion we first ask you to consider the course as enacted in two short vignettes drawn from our experiences this year.

## LOCATION 1

A new sixth form in an urban school. We meet the Head of Sixth, tell her what we've done previously, show her our materials, get a sense of how they might fit in to what the students are doing; she is generally enthusiastic, assures us it will be relevant and useful. We agree to offer a five week course adapting our materials to take into account the students' needs, and helping them work on the writing they are doing in their classes. We plan for a meeting with a wider spread of teachers prior to starting, but it is postponed and not re-scheduled. As a result we start the course without much sense of what the students may be doing and what teachers are hoping for from us.

We arrive and sign in. Students start to appear but are shepherded by the Head of Sixth, who sets to work directing them to the various tables. We have no register, and miss an opportunity to establish contact with the students ourselves. We get on with the lesson but students are tired, distracted, chatty among themselves. We are struck by how at home they are with one another and as a result, how little attention we are getting. They grumble that the exercise is similar to one they've done in English lessons, and when asked to write are fidgety and reluctant: "Can't you just give me a sentence to start, Miss?"

The following week very few students appear. Some are evident outside the window on the street; there is waving. Questioned why there are so few, a boy explains "They're not here because they got out before they were caught." So, the end of the school day is a race to escape. "It's like a prison here," he says. We find out that the workshop was compulsory, when we'd thought of it more loosely as "recommended" perhaps.

The next two weeks are better, more focused, although the students are still reluctant to work on their own writing. The final week numbers are right down again; we'd planned to start with them looking at their own writing, but the four students who've turned up haven't brought any: unbeknownst to us they had an essay deadline the previous week, and now they are not doing writing; they'd rather start preparing a presentation. Our course now feels like a homework club.

## LOCATION 2

A large sixth form college that feels like a campus. We are asked to work with their honours programme students, a group of academically high achieving stu-

dents who have been identified as likely to go to university; this is a different approach for us, we feel positive. It's challenging though, as it means delivery to the whole group—120 students—but we work with this, agree to have tables set up in the hall, that teachers and college tutors will participate, that we will pass on our materials for them to use in their teaching. We redesign the course for the larger numbers and different environment. We meet with a couple of teachers and some tutors a couple of weeks before we start—they are very positive about our focus and approach.

We arrive to find the hall unprepared. When the session is due to start one (lone) student has arrived, former students employed as “college mentors” are milling about; they suspect students have gone off to get lunch. We wait, a handful of students drift in, mentors go off to telephone the rest. After half an hour we decide to start—we have 28 students, a nice class size. It emerges that no students can stay for the planned hour and a half so we cut back our plan. Students have brought a range of writing—personal statements, scholarship applications, a science report, English essays. It's a good session with focus that leaves us generally feeling energised. No teachers attend.

No teachers next week either. We find ourselves in an out of the way classroom, again starting late—and working now with only seven students out of our possible 120. Lots—we find out circuitously from one of the college tutors—may have gone off to visit various universities, our own included. Everything about this planned course seems to have crumbled, except for the fact that we turn up, but the fact of our turning up has no impact on anything much—the action is all elsewhere. As this course was promised to be literally much more centre stage, what, we ask, has shifted between the enthusiastic planning and take-up and the reality?

The third and final week. We arrive, expecting little, having decided to run a much shorter class in case no one turns up. Six of last week's students have returned and two from the first week; they have all brought work, all listen and participate in the discussion around the activity which gets them looking at tone and formality. There is concentration, quiet discussion, reviewing and rewriting sections of their texts. Two girls in particular make significant changes, really finding focus in the claims they are starting to make. We are all surprised by the end of the hour. It feels like, for these few students, it is finally coming together, just as we are about to leave.

## **THE COURSE AS “AUTONOMOUS” AND THEREFORE PERIPHERAL**

To unpack a little of what is going on in these vignettes and why our experiences felt so unsatisfactory, we've found it helpful to engage with Street's distinction between autonomous and ideological models of literacy (Brian Street, 1984; see

Chrissie Boughey, 2008). We see that problems with the course in both instances stem from its separation from the locations' practices, purposes and players. By creating a course on writing that stands outside of mainstream activities, subjects and the timetabled hours of the school, we inadvertently reinforce a notion of writing as an autonomous entity that is separable from the actual context in which writing takes place and has meaning (as, for example, "assignment" or "homework" or "exam"). In designing materials for such a course, we are in a sense forced to see them this way too, as autonomous, detached from the teaching and learning happening in school. It follows that, of necessity, we treat the writing that students bring to work on in the course largely autonomously; we can be no real judge of its quality, if quality is in reality determined by assessment frameworks which we do not employ. As such our teaching and materials, when they work, are, we could argue, only accidentally successful; their effectiveness intrinsically and inevitably limited by the conditions of their use. It is the autonomous nature of the course, we conclude, that makes it peripheral and largely inappropriate or irrelevant as a vehicle to achieve transformation.

## **WRITING IN SCHOOLS IS A SOCIAL PRACTICE AND WE NEED TO RECOGNIZE THIS**

Against this, the experience we capture in the vignettes prompts us to recognize that writing is already a part of "social practice," or what James Gee calls "Discourse"—"not language, and surely not grammar [which he differentiates as discourse], but *saying(writing)-doing-being-valuing-believing combinations*" (1990, 1994, p. 142)—and therefore ideological. Discourse or social practice here is not a cool, theoretical concept, but something highly complex, instantiated, and dependent on the messy and changeable relationships of participants to each other, to themselves, to their space, to their texts. It creates insight around the moment, for instance, when one of "our" students resisted rewriting a short text by a fellow student because that student was known in the year group as "a really good writer." "Writing" here clearly emerged as part of social practice, of "having one's being" at this particular school, in this particular peer group. If we were to have any purchase in that classroom, we needed to recognize this.

## **A SOCIAL PRACTICE LENS ALERTS US TO LIKELY DISJUNCTIONS IN OUR UNDERSTANDINGS**

Outside of a social practice perspective, our course might be expected to have run relatively smoothly: it was something that was perceived by teaching staff and by ourselves—both parties experienced in education—as meeting the identified needs of the students. The teachers and advisors we spoke to in setting up and

developing our approach gave us lists of concerns (structure, formality, argument) that were familiar to us; they also sometimes seized upon our materials as addressing precisely the problems they encounter in reading their students' scripts. We know little, however, about whether and how these materials might translate into their regular subject teaching. A social practice lens suggests that the apparent unity in our goals may well gloss disjunctions in our experiences and understandings that would show themselves only in local contexts of use. For example, we would not expect materials used in a classroom that sits outside the social practices of a school and by teachers—ourselves—who are also outsiders, to carry the same meanings if employed by subject teachers in subject classes for subject-based assessment ends.

### **ACTIVITIES AND OUTCOMES ARE LINKED BUT THIS ISN'T ALWAYS RECOGNIZED**

Such intimate linking of goals and activities is not, though, convenient for educational planning, particularly where an apparently clear “issue” such as “student writing” has been identified. Nicholas Burboles in his paper “Ways of thinking about educational quality” (2004) observes that models of education that emphasize outcomes (which most models do, even if only weakly), often omit to recognize that outcomes are related to practices; they assume, that is, that one can substitute any kind of practice without affecting the achievement of the outcome. In fact, as we've noted, neither goals nor practices are autonomous: “Activities do not simply aim at goals, they partly constitute and reconstitute them” (John Dewey 1899/1980, glossed by Burboles, 2004). There can be different players in these processes of constitution and reconstitution too; the agency is not solely that of those invested with authority. So for example the students in our first location who came to the final week of the course, successfully resisted our plans for a writing exercise, and used the time instead to get ahead with their homework, something they'd earlier complained the course was preventing them from doing. Their expressed aim was always in any case different than ours—not an abstract “write better,” but a clear “write better in exams.”

### **WRITING IN TRANSITION IS A QUESTIONABLE NOTION**

When we began our work with schools we framed it as being about “writing in transition”—an invitation to students to come, after school, into our university context, largely to think about writing in the ways we think about it. However the very notion of transition, resting on moving uni-directionally from one known to another known, came to seem problematic: we didn't really know much about the writing done in schools; at the same time, we were aware that any generalized notion of “writing in universities” was flawed. In addition, we noted

with some unease a tendency in discussions of “transitions work” (e.g., Ursula Wingate, 2007) to characterize what goes on in universities in terms of highly valorized activities (criticality, argument, research)—and by implication to suggest that none of these qualities are present or developed in pre-university education. We saw such characterisations as potentially contributing to a strongly teleological model of education in which long-term extrinsic goals (graduate employability for example) come to dominate the here-and-now experiences of students and their teachers, creating an instrumentality for writing we would not want to promote (see Mitchell, 2010). We picked up that others were voicing related concerns: Carol Atherton (2003), for example, pointed out that A-level English is not just a preparation for university English: many students don’t go on to university or if they do, study different subjects. And Michael Marland (2003) was asserting that A-level experiences needed to be recognized as intrinsically valuable, and that the needs of higher education should not be allowed to obscure them. This thinking sensitized us to the limitations—and potential harm—of framing our work in schools as “transitions work.”

## **CONCLUSION: WE NEED TO MOVE TOWARDS “TALKBACK”**

Even practices that apparently achieve their intended goals, Burboles (2004) cautions, may have other unintended or unarticulated consequences. The more we have thought about our writing course whether offered at the university or—in an attempt to get closer to “where students were at”—in schools, the more we are persuaded that we need to attend to a more complex notion of both practice and consequence. We conclude that we cannot separate writing from its social practice; we must work within the contexts in which writing is produced and becomes meaningful, acknowledging “the values and attitudes towards print, and the socially embedded understanding of the purposes of a text these values and attitudes give rise to” (Boughey, p. 194). In practical terms this more ideological stance means working with teachers to understand and enhance *their* practices, rather than with handfuls of individual students. Our aim, we feel, should be a recasting of Lillis’ “talkback” dialogue (2003, 2006) where we move away from interaction whereby we, the “HE experts,” dispense the advice which will help “solve” students’ easily defined writing “problems” to one in which the purposes of the school are primary, the responsibility is the teachers’ and our role is to facilitate processes by which they can select, adapt and incorporate ideas and materials around writing into their everyday teaching and curriculum. This positions the students’ and teachers’ A-level experiences as being intrinsically valuable, and does not allow the needs or expertise of higher education to obscure them (following Marland, 2003). We feel we should—and do—resist offering even a set of recommendations on how to accomplish this type of dialogic relationship, as to do this would yet again detach writing

from its social practice.

## WHY OUR CONCLUSION IS NOT MORE OBVIOUS

Ironically, what we describe here as an aspiration for our work with schools is the position we have always taken in our work in writing and curriculum development at our university (see e.g., Teresa McConlogue, Sally Mitchell, & Kelly Peake, 2012; Sally Mitchell & Alan Evison, 2006). We are intrigued to recognize that in our work with schools we adopted a model (the stand-alone course) that in other contexts we would have argued vociferously against. But the situation is instructive; it points, we think, to the persistence of a skills-based, decontextualized conception of writing and “problems with writing,” and the instrumental value of this conception—even to us—as a way to make writing visible. Creating a course enabled us to begin to participate in the institutional framing and funding of widening participation work which is measured by the participation of individual students. It enabled us to respond to the attractiveness both to the university and to schools of an identifiable product that could be offered and taken up. In contrast to this “something for nothing” deal, the challenge of getting involved in complex school contexts and finding time and space to work with staff who are already working at full capacity, would probably have been beyond us. (This remains a significant challenge, after all, for many writing developers within their own institutional contexts.) Four years on, however, we are in a stronger position; in dialogue with teachers and university colleagues about our cautionary insights, equipped with a flexible/challengeable body of ideas around writing at A-level, and clearer and more adamant that the way forward for working on writing in schools is through embedded partnership *within their* myriad social practice contexts.

## NOTES

1. Based at a large UK HE institution in the East End of London, we are part of Thinking Writing, a small team of educational developers who work primarily with academic staff around the roles that writing can play in learning in the disciplines.
2. The term “sixth form” refers to a non-compulsory two year course that students can choose to take at the end of secondary education in England and Wales; it often offers a route into further or higher education. The most common qualification that students work towards in that time is the “A-level.”

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