CHAPTER 25

TRANSFORMING DIALOGIC SPACES IN AN "ELITE" INSTITUTION: ACADEMIC LITERACIES, THE TUTORIAL AND HIGH-ACHIEVING STUDENTS

Corinne Boz

Studies of transition to higher education highlight the fact that, in higher education contexts in the United Kingdom, undergraduate students receive limited one-to-one contact with academic staff. The lack of opportunity for regular, individualized contact with teaching staff can cause feelings of alienation and confusion about academic expectations (Anthony Cook & Janet Leckey, 1999) and can also be responsible for a lack of knowledge/understanding on behalf of the academic staff of students' personal/writing histories (see Ruth Whittaker, 2008). Ultimately, problematic student transitions may lead to issues with student retention (Mark Palmer et al., 2009). It has been argued that a more individualized educational experience would help to support students through those initial transition issues (Whittaker, 2008), although ever-expanding class sizes and increasing student-staff ratios arising from the massification of higher education would seem to make this an idealistic scenario.

The tutorial system at the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge (Oxbridge) affords the opportunity for close and sustained dialogue with tutors potentially providing ideal conditions for a supported and individualized transition from school to university. Given this potential, many people are surprised to find that a project supporting student transitions at the University of Cambridge exists at all. However, the following quotations from First Year undergraduates taken from our annual Undergraduate Learning Enhancement Survey illustrate that being prepared (Gillian Ballinger, 2003; Alan Booth, 2005; Maggie Leese, 2010), adapting to new expectations, particularly when they are often implicit (Theresa Lillis & Joan Turner, 2001), and understanding new discourses (David Bartholomae, 1986; Tamsin Haggis, 2006; Mary Lea & Brian Street, 1998) are significant challenges in our context also, reflecting experience across the UK higher education sector more widely:

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> Although I think my essay writing skills were developed sufficiently in a certain way before I arrived, I have found that the difference in approach and style has been great and difficult to adapt to. (First year student)

> I often felt that my [tutor] was talking to me as if they were addressing a third year, not a first year fresh out of school who was confronting a subject for the first time in a completely alien manner, and in something close to a foreign language. Of course there is a jump between A-level and undergraduate study, but I often felt as though I was expected to have made that jump before I reached my first [tutorial]. (First year student)

> I felt very unprepared; the only advice given prior to university (and indeed throughout the year!) was that "people learn in different ways," without mentioning what these "ways" were. (First year student)

These comments are taken from students who have been very successful at A-level (or equivalent), they have met or exceeded academic expectations and have therefore been able to learn and, crucially, present knowledge in the ways that have been expected from them in their educational contexts to date. And yet, for some, our annual surveys reveal that the transition to university learning and writing is a greater challenge than expected.

In this chapter, I will discuss some of the issues surrounding transitions to academic writing at university for our high-achieving students and illustrate the ways in which we have incorporated the theoretical principles of an Academic Literacies approach into the design and delivery of our transitions project. In addition, I will demonstrate the ways in which the data, research and experience in our "elite" institutional context extends the boundaries of current Academic Literacies research to represent high-achieving students who have been underrepresented by the research to date (see Ursula Wingate & Christopher Tribble, 2012, for further discussion of Academic Literacies' focus on "non-traditional" students). For the purpose of this chapter, I am defining the university as "elite" in relation to its position in the world university rankings (see Times Higher Education, 2015). In defining our students as "high-achieving," I intend this to reflect their academic achievement at A-level. Of those students accepted for admission in 2014, 97.3% achieved the equivalent of A*AA or better counting only their best three A Levels (excluding General Studies and Critical Thinking) (University of Cambridge, 2015). In addition, I am consciously moving away from defining students with the dichotomous "traditional/non-traditional" label as it masks the diversity of the student population and has become increasingly meaningless (see Elaine Keane, 2011).

CONTEXT

The Oxbridge tutorial system is internationally renowned and commands "an almost mystic, cult status" according to David Palfreyman (2008). In Cambridge, the tutorial[1] constitutes the core of the educational provision provided by the 31 self-regulating colleges with curriculum, lectures, and practicals being provided by the central university via faculties and departments. Tutorials are described as follows:

> … a medium through which students learn to work autonomously, to learn with and from others, to argue and to present arguments, to handle problems, to question their own assumptions, and to meet deadlines. (University of Cambridge, 2009)

The tutorial is designed to allow tutors and students to discuss, explore and learn from each other (see Paul Ashwin, 2005, for a more detailed discussion of the Oxbridge tutorial and the qualitatively different ways in which it is perceived by undergraduates). The number of students within a tutorial most usually ranges from one to four or five depending on discipline and, in most cases, students will be required to produce a piece of work for each tutorial. It is significant to note that this tutorial work is formative and carries no summative assessment. Students are assessed by end-of-year examinations, in most cases.

Tutors are selected by the college and are responsible for the academic progress of their undergraduates. They may be eminent professors or first year PhD students and are selected for their disciplinary expertise. The system confers a large degree of freedom on tutors in terms of their approach to teaching, and this allows them to provide the conditions for an ideal dialogic learning situation where both tutor and student work towards creating new meanings and understandings through the process of critical discussion. The diversity of experience and pedagogical approach to teaching does, however, provide a challenge for the university in terms of accounting for quality of teaching and ensuring parity of experience for all its undergraduates.

Although it can be argued that the ideal Cambridge tutorial offers dialogic space for discussing/learning/creating subject content and knowledge, survey data from our context demonstrates that the same focus is not always given to dialogue around disciplinary writing practices and this can be problematic for students. Indeed, as David Russell et al. (2009) suggest, in their broader discussion of writing practices in HE, although the undergraduate courses of Oxford and Cambridge are "writing intensive" they are not necessarily "writing conscious" (p. 402). Students can find this lack of explicit writing focus challenging as they attempt to understand the requirements of genre and discipline, indicating that if this essential element is missing the dialogic situation is less than "ideal."

THE PROJECT

The Transkills Project was established in 2008, through the Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund (http://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/offices/education/lts/news/ltsn17.pdf). Occupying a collaborative space (resourced by the Education Section, Centre for Applied Research in Educational Technologies, and Personal and Professional Development) outside of faculty, departmental or collegiate structures, it emerged from institutional discourses centred upon student deficit and the recognition that the traditional academic socialization or apprenticeship model of writing support (see Lea & Street, 1998) might not address the needs of all students. Dominant perceptions were that first year students were no longer able to write on arrival at university, that this inability to write took time away from teaching disciplinary knowledge and tutors were becoming increasingly frustrated in dealing with issues that were perceived to be the responsibility of the school system. The initial aim of the project, then, was to investigate the experiences of first year students in their transition to undergraduate study at Cambridge and provide resources to support them, acknowledging that "transition support should not be extraneous to the mainstream activity of the institution, but integral to the learning experience" (Whittaker, 2008, p. 3). It was also our explicit aim for the project to support all incoming undergraduates and not just those considered to be "at risk" (see Wingate, 2012; see for discussion of 'risk', Thesen Reflections 6, this volume). In addition, we aimed to embed a scholarly model of support firmly based on our own institutional data and enhanced by current research into writing and transitions (see Anne Pitkethly & Michael Prosser, 2001).

In the Cambridge teaching system, texts are produced and discussed for and within the tutorial context and so enhancing student writing practices involved the tutorial, the tutor and the student. This engendered a move away from considering writing as a deficiency in the students' skill set towards an Academic Literacies perspective emphasising writing as a social practice in which meaning and text are constructed in dialogue and relations of power are implicated. In moving away from a traditional skills-deficit model of writing, our project became about, not only supporting students in learning to talk about and produce effective writing within their discipline at university, but also about developing tutors' understanding of student writing practices, of the ways in which the students' practices have been shaped by their previous A-level writing histories, and the tutor's own role in supporting student writers in transition. It provided an opportunity to support tutors in becoming more "writing-conscious" (Russell et al., 2009). This is where our project began to challenge the implicit institutional framing of academic writing. It is significant to note, however, that in attempting to address the challenge of supporting students in acquiring academic literacies, we were not attempting to spoon-feed for, as Ronald Barnett states, "A genuine Higher Education is un-

settling; it is not meant to be a cosy experience. It is disturbing because ultimately, the student comes to see that things could always be other than they are" (Barnett, 1990, p. 155).

The design and delivery of our resources has been decided in collaboration with "experts" familiar with the requirements of each different context and as a result our provision has been varied in nature. However, we have found that the process represented in Figure 25.1 is most effective in bringing about changes in both perspective and experience and most closely reflects the principles of the Academic Literacies framework incorporated into our approach.

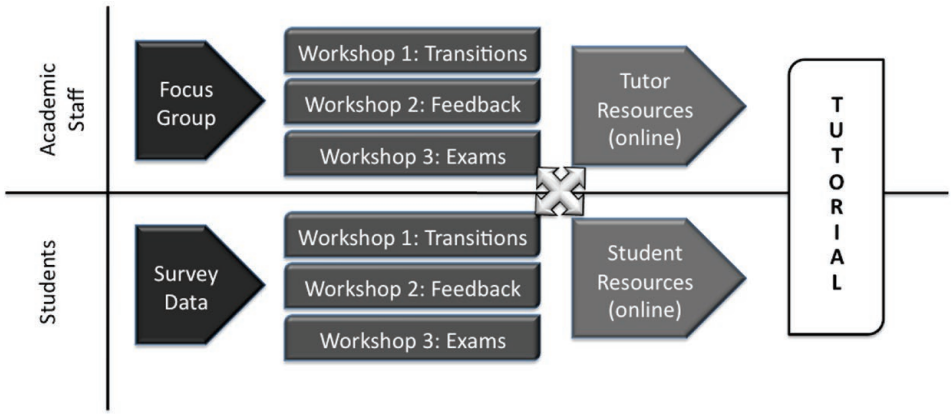

Figure 25.1: The Transkills Project—the process of creating dialogue around writing beyond the tutorial.

Figure 25.1 represents the process we have used to engage a range of faculties and departments, spanning Arts, Humanities, Social Sciences, and Biological Sciences, in enhancing writing support for first year students. Biological Sciences is used here as an illustrative example of a process used more broadly. In the first instance, we identified a group of Directors of Studies who were willing to act as a focus group. Issues raised at this initial discussion echoed the wider institutional discourse of student deficit with Directors of Studies highlighting the need for online writing support resources for students. Before developing these resources, however, the issues highlighted in the focus group discussions (see Figure 25.1) formed the basis of a series of workshops with tutors. These workshops were open to tutors of all levels of experience and not presented or perceived as initial "training" for new tutors but rather an opportunity for dialogue with peers around teaching practice.

To take into account the time pressures on academic staff, the workshops were delivered in a blended format with participants receiving an online pre-workshop resource in advance of a one-hour lunchtime session with a follow-up online resource delivered after the workshop. The pre-workshop resource was critical to the

success of this process. Containing a short survey form, it asked participants to respond to questions pertinent to the upcoming workshop and relating to themes arising from the student survey data. Participant responses were then available to the workshop facilitators in advance of the session, allowing them to tailor the session to the specific group of people attending. This proved invaluable in ensuring that the sessions were perceived to be relevant to both individual and disciplinary context. The comments received via the pre-workshop package were collated and presented back to the workshop participants in the form of visual maps which provided an anonymized and less face-threatening way of beginning discussions around the workshop theme.

The outputs of the workshops, including student/tutor data, essay samples, and other documents used, were collated and sent out as a post-workshop resource. Significantly, however, the discussions and opinions captured at the tutor workshops were incorporated into designing the student workshops and online resources. As Figure 25.1 illustrates, as far as possible, the resources for staff and students were mirrored, both centring on the same themes drawn from tutor focus groups and student survey data (e.g., For tutors—Providing Effective Feedback /For students—Using Feedback Effectively). Some aspects of the content were also mirrored: the same authentic, first-year tutorial essays were included in both tutor and student sessions, for example. Quotations from tutors were also incorporated into the student resources and vice versa. This "mirroring" helped the project team to create an ongoing dialogue, a discussion around student writing outside of the tutorial context.

As the colleges of the university are responsible for teaching, the student workshops were delivered within the college rather than faculty/department. In the initial stages of the Transkills project, the project team delivered all workshops in collaboration with colleges. Later, the project team moved towards a model of facilitating workshops for college teaching staff who consequently delivered workshops to students within their own colleges. To date, 28 of the 31 colleges have been represented at these sessions.

DISCUSSION

In creating these new spaces for discussion of discipline-specific academic writing practices outside of the tutorial context, we provided an opportunity for tutors to consciously consider their students' writing histories (by highlighting A-level writing practices), to articulate their own framing of academic writing and have this debated by peers and to consider ways in which their own teaching practices could be adapted to support student writing in transition. Crucially, we also created space for explicit discussion of the dialogic nature of the tutorial and examined ways of best facilitating the types of learning situations "where pedagogic practices

are oriented towards making visible/challenging/playing with official and unofficial discourse" (Lillis, 2003).

Feedback collected from tutors, both immediately following workshops and three to six months later, suggested that they had appreciated a focussed discussion on the recent changes to the A-level system and the implications this had for their teaching practice. Since attending the workshops many felt that they were better equipped to discuss writing in tutorials. In addition to these factors, however, one of the most common responses from the tutor feedback was that they valued the opportunity to talk with other tutors about their tutorial practices. The space these workshops provided has not traditionally existed within our institutional structures but was clearly valued by participants:

> Yes my [tutorial] practice has changed since attending the workshops. I have more confidence that the feedback I give students is constructive as I try to cover the various points covered in the feedback sheets supplied in the workshop i.e., structure, argument, content etc. I have also tried to use some of the techniques suggested by other [tutors] in the workshop. (College tutor)

> I have definitely adapted my tutorial practices since attending the workshops. I now give much more specific guidance to students about essay writing and in particular structuring their essays. (College tutor)

> I found the workshops very useful and they have had an impact on my [tutorial] practice, primarily in terms of the type of advice that I give regarding essay structure …. The workshops were also useful in confirming some of the things that I already do in [tutorials] … and this is useful because, to some extent, we tend to carry out [tutorials] in isolation as far as technique is concerned. (College tutor).

We also provided spaces for students to articulate their experience of the transition from A-level writing to disciplinary writing and provided opportunities beyond the tutorial where students could reflect, with peers, on the goals of their texts and their role as active participants in the feedback process.

CONCLUSION

In summary, an Academic Literacies framework has allowed us to begin to reframe discussion of academic writing practices within our institution. It has enabled us to move discussion away from shifting responsibility onto the stu-

dents for arriving at University with a deficit skill set (the high-achieving profile of the students here makes this approach hard to justify, in any case). It has also helped to demonstrate that the traditional apprenticeship model of implicit induction, so often relied upon in the tutorial context, is not necessarily adequate even for high-achieving students. It has afforded us the opportunity to frame the discussion in terms of understanding both student and tutor practices, examining learner histories and the implications of A-level practices and the way these different factors interact. Discussions are not framed by deficiency in either students'or tutors' skills and therefore have not been initiated from a point of blame. This factor has been significant in fostering engagement across different contexts within the institution. The project has contributed towards changes in the nature of dialogue around writing and learning within our institution and, in doing so, has contributed towards changes in pedagogy at the level of the tutorial. Significantly, the work of the project has directly contributed towards the establishment of a new 'institutional space," the Teaching and Learning Joint Sub-committee of the General Board's Education Committee and Senior Tutors' Standing Committee on Education, a body with a specific remit to consider issues relating to the teaching and learning of undergraduates and act as an interface between the colleges and the university on study skills development, including support for transitions between school and university.

In addition to the ways in which an Academic Literacies framework has informed our institutional support of academic writing, I would argue that the pedagogical application of the approach in our context is significant in extending the practical and theoretical reach of the Academic Literacies perspective away from the focus of early Academic Literacies research (e.g., Lillis, 2001) on "non-traditional" students to illustrate its effectiveness in establishing transformational spaces in an "elite" context where all students are considered high-achieving.

NOTE

1. At the University of Cambridge, the one-to-one teaching for undergraduate students is called a "supervision." However, as in any other context this is called a tutorial, and, to ensure a clear distinction from graduate supervision, I will use "tutorial" and "tutor" to refer to the teaching session and the teacher.

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