CHAPTER 18.

THINKING WRITING AT QUEEN MARY, UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

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In this contribution we outline and discuss the work of Thinking Writing at Queen Mary, University of London. Thinking Writing seeks, through a focus on writing, to facilitate professional development and enhanced teaching, assessment and curriculum design. We describe how the initiative has developed over a 10-year period, the range of activities it now encompasses, and the theoretical orientations and resources from which it draws. To explain the negotiated way in which the Thinking Writing team typically works, we give an account of our involvement with processes of change in a single department of the university. We note that our approach does not assume particular models of writing nor measure success in terms of the "written product"; and we consider the potential future impact on our work of new strategic initiatives that articulate "writing" as an explicit goal.

Queen Mary, University of London is a highly regarded research-intensive university in east London with 3,000 staff and 16,000 students in three faculties: Humanities and Social Science, Science and Engineering, and Medicine and Dentistry. Based centrally in the Language and Learning Unit (LLU), Thinking Writing (TW) is an established team whose activity centres on the development of writing as a pedagogical tool and outcome within the mainstream of disciplinary teaching and learning across the institution. The team is staff- rather than student-facing, its aim being to assist academic departments with their educational work (designing modules and programmes, setting and assessing assignments, enhancing student learning) specifically through the lens of writing. TW was begun in 2001 as a three-year project with a part-time coordinator. Drawing inspiration from Writing in the Disciplines at Cornell University, the project was made possible by Teaching Quality Enhancement funds allocated to UK higher education institutions and, in our case, bid for

internally.[1] Since then it has grown significantly and now comprises the coordinator and a team of three permanent advisors.

The location of TW in the LLU has been a factor in its successful growth thus far; income-generating foundation programmes for international students are central to the LLU's remit and these have enabled Alan Evison (head of the LLU) and Nigel Relph, Director of Corporate Affairs (the organisational area in which the LLU sits) to demonstrate their commitment to TW's goals through financial cross-subsidy. Over the period of TW's existence, however, interest in issues of student writing has also moved higher up the institution's wider teaching and learning agenda. So in January 2009, for example, the Vice Principal for Teaching and Learning created a "Student Writing Working Group" charged with taking an overview of the current situation at Queen Mary, identifying priorities and making recommendations for future work. At the same time, the institution has also formulated a "Statement of Graduate Attributes," which includes a commitment to "developing graduates who use writing for learning and reflection" (QMUL, 2010).

These recent developments suggest a continuing and perhaps increasingly significant role for Thinking Writing at QM, and it is timely that we should have occasion, through the writing of this profile essay, to reflect on the kind of work we predominantly do, and why.

As the TW team has grown, we have been able to extend our range of activities, and these now include funding and supporting departmental working groups and professional development schemes, developing models of co-teaching, and conducting small scale research. This year we have begun to run "Urban Writing Retreats" for staff and postgraduate students, as a way of supporting their practice and productivity whilst encouraging reflection on the writing process and passing on ideas that may be incorporated into teaching. Hoping to enrich our insights into pre-university learning, we have also used small scale funding to work on writing with students and teachers in local schools. As we have done from the beginning, we continue to put on cross-disciplinary exchange of practice fora, but we have moved away from offering short workshops, designed and led by us, taking the view that although they provide some visibility for our ideas, they tend not to be very effective in establishing collaborative relationships over time.[2]

Most fundamentally our work is characterised by an ethnographic orientation; we do not expect to find sufficient meaning in textual objects themselves, but rather take the complex "natural habitat" in which writing occurs as the object of our understanding and activity (Geertz, 1983). Theoretically, this approach draws on insights from UK Academic Literacies work (see Lillis & Scott, 2008, for overview), though we have less focus on individual students than

many studies in that field. In practice our holistic/contextual orientation means that, in some cases, our work centres on using writing to explore and express ideas in the subject, while in others it is more concerned with developing ways of improving students' texts, often by focusing on process. We've found that overreliance on the "learning to write/writing to learn" division can be unproductive because it doesn't offer a critique of the "products" students are learning to write and also detracts from the intense learning (shaping) that often needs to go on in writing successfully for a disciplinary reader. For this reason approaches and studies (e.g., Hewings, 2005; Ravelli, 2005) that offer linguistic explanations for perceived qualitative differences amongst student texts offer a useful resource for some of our work. More generally, we view learners as actively constructing their understanding of disciplinary concepts and articulating these through writing; it is through writing (at least in a UK context) that students can begin to participate in the discourse community of their academic discipline (Northedge, 2003).

HOW WE WORK – AN EXAMPLE

BACKGROUND

This section will bring to life the kind of developmental activity that is key to Thinking Writing's work with academic disciplinary staff and departments by presenting a skeleton account of work over the 2009-10 academic year with colleagues in the School of Biological and Chemical Sciences (SBCS). This work picks up on earlier involvement of TW with SBCS and is still evolving as we write. It is fairly characteristic in that it eschews any particular model of writing or writing development, and involves the negotiation of contested beliefs and practices, relating not only to writing but also to the way knowledge is conceived and curricula are designed.

When Sally Mitchell came to QM in 2001, an early meeting with the Head of Biology led to invitations to observe and talk with staff teaching on the Integrated Studies in Biological Sciences module (ISBS). Taught at second and third year level to all students in small tutorial groups, with the majority of academic teachers involved, the module aims to help students make connections across the sub-disciplines of biology. When Sally became involved, however, there was perceived dissatisfaction amongst staff and students, with the former disappointed by the quality of the essays students were producing. A plan was hatched to create a more structured and uniform approach to running tutorials with sequenced reading, writing and discussion activities; this was piloted by a

group of volunteer staff. When the overall response was positive, all Biology staff were asked to adopt the approach. It was also decided to redesign a compulsory first year "skills" course, Essential Skills for Biologists (ESB), to introduce more reading and writing tasks. As for ISBS, these tasks, focussed on reasonably general, controversial topics, would be part of work in tutorial groups led by almost every member of the teaching staff. The assumption, incorrect as it turned out, was that all tutors would be comfortable addressing the chosen topics. The speedy development and apparent staff buy-in for the approaches and materials developed for these modules was on the face of it a success for TW. Nonetheless, Sally had reservations; for TW, "writing in the disciplines" implies that writing be fully part and parcel of an integrated curriculum, in which, as Barnett and Coate (2005, p. 56) put it, "disciplinary content" and "disciplinary skills . . . take in each other's washing." Separating the development of skills from the acquisition of disciplinary content and making writing (essays) the subject of the teaching rather than part of a process of wider learning, she felt that the ESB module in particular was at best "semi-integrated" (Warren, 2002) and in TW's terms, therefore, problematic. Once the revised modules were established, however, opportunities for critical re-engagement with TW dwindled and it was some time before Thinking Writing was able to re-engage in detailed discussion about work in Biology.

Getting Back into Conversation

In summer 2009, however, the School initiated a review of ESB and ISBS and invited TW to participate. Early meetings threw up some key differences in the way TW and disciplinary staff were thinking about the modules.

The perception amongst SBCS staff was that the modules needed to cover more "transferable skills," including critical thinking. On the TW side we were more sceptical, questioning the educational justification for running modules focussing on skills (see North, 2005). In particular we were concerned that these modules were perceived as meeting the School's desire that students "learn to write," whilst simultaneously narrowing the definition of writing to the skills required to "write essays." With writing thus "fixed" in these modules, no attention was being paid to its development and potential uses in other modules; for example, in the production of text types such as lab reports, and for purposes such as developing and checking understanding of disciplinary processes or concepts.

Another concern of SBCS staff was that ESB in the first year should be streamlined and linked more clearly and formally to ISBS in the second and third year—thus emphasising a "vertical" skills development stream through the Schools' degree programmes. Ultimately ESB and ISBS should prepare

students for their final year research project, particularly for undertaking an extended literature study. TW had reservations about overemphasising this vertical structure, sensing that the more important integration should be "horizontal;" that is, making links between ESB or ISBS and other modules that students are taking at the same time, particularly as the original purpose of ISBS had been to foster such horizontal orientation. Placing the onus on ESB and ISBS to prepare students for the research in the final year might, we felt, unhelpfully separate out "research skills" from the overall disciplinary development of students—leaving all other courses to be perceived as about "content" alone. The "content" of ESB itself was a further concern—how to find a common topic relevant to all students and staff from the wide range—ecology to microbiology—of specialist subfields in biological sciences.

Some Pivotal Events

The TW team felt we needed a longer involvement with SBCS tutors, in order to better understand their thinking and develop a relationship. So we sought the SBCS staff group's approval for a two-year plan, to work on reviewing the current modules and implementing and evaluating changes. Between October and December 2009 TW staff observed tutorials, had informal chats and formal audio-recorded interviews with staff and students, and collected samples of students' writing. Throughout this period, the TW team shared impressions and exchanged ideas on the best way forward. These discussions and an early analysis of the interview data formed the basis for a short report, proposing changes, which was sent to the SBCS staff group in December.

In this account we focus only on what happened in relation to ESB, leaving out ISBS, where more minor changes were suggested. Key Biology staff referred to are Brendan Curran and Caroline Brennan.

Caroline had made the suggestion that students' learning in ESB would be more active if a Problem Based Learning (PBL) approach were introduced. PBL is widely used in higher education in the UK. In PBL students are presented with "problem scenarios" (Savin-Baden, 2003, p. 2) which they usually work on in groups, deciding what information is needed and how they should go about addressing the problem. Typically these scenarios have no correct answer. Pursuing the PBL idea further, Caroline pointed out that in order to introduce PBL it would be necessary to identify some problems that all staff and students could relate to—a return to the vexed issue of the common topic. As we explored this issue, Caroline mentioned that all Biology students need a good grasp of experimental design; this is essential for their third-year projects and is an area that all staff have expertise in. We proposed therefore that tutors should think about

a problem within their field and relevant to work in other first-year modules, present it to students and ask them to think about ways of solving it. The tutor would then guide students' thinking through questioning; e.g., "You want to investigate X, what would you do? What makes a good experiment?" and help students think about interpreting results—"What is this telling you?" To help students think through experimental design, tutors would devise exploratory writing tasks, similar to the current short writing tasks in ESB. Thus, we defined the "common topic" as a way of thinking, rather than a content area.

Following this discussion, TW organised an exchange of practice that gave Caroline the opportunity to present her thinking to colleagues from other disciplines and get their feedback. A further breakthrough occurred when Brendan secured funding to replace some ESB tutorial slots with an e-Forum, giving students opportunities for online group interaction. TW facilitated a meeting between Brendan and Caroline to discuss redesigning the new course, making aspects of experimental design the topic for online writing and discussion tasks. These tasks would begin to build towards the kind of thinking and writing students needed to do for third-year project work, while the new topic would provide an opportunity to move away from the emphasis on essay writing, and to introduce a new more discipline-specific text type, a mini-grant proposal.

At the time of writing this profile essay the proposed changes have been submitted to the SBCS staff group for approval and we will need a further meeting with the Head of School to agree on further TW work with Biology, including detailed planning of the revised module, and evaluation to provide tutors with evidence for future modifications.

REFLECTIONS

As our example indicates, the primary focus of TW's work is on supporting the professional development of colleagues involved in teaching and the enhancement of disciplinary teaching, curricula, and assessment. We may be distinct from many of our colleagues in the UK field of staff and educational development in that we use our various theoretically—and empirically—informed understandings of writing to think about issues in teaching and learning. Yet we have in common with this group an interest in understanding how change occurs in educational institutions (Wareing & Elvidge, 2007) and how we can develop thriving collaborative relationships with academic teachers, working towards creating enhanced opportunities for learning at university.

We hope the example illustrates what we have found about effective collaboration: that it requires time to establish relationships with tutors, to establish trust and to understand their concerns and the context in which they work.

Observations, informal and formal interviews with tutors and students, and developing a greater awareness of tutors' teaching contexts through collection of relevant documents (e.g., module descriptions, samples of students' written work) all help us to get a feel for the situation and to recognise the knowledge and expertise of our colleagues in their discipline and as teachers. We expect to challenge and question our colleagues, bringing in alternative understandings and ideas; and we expect to be challenged (about, for example, the practical constraints on teaching in contemporary higher education) and to glimpse (if not fully grasp) new insights into disciplinary thinking. Such partnership work is rarely straightforward, steady or completed, but is open to chance, and characterised by the kinds of stops and starts, twists and turns we experienced with Caroline in identifying a common topic (something we are still not sure will be acceptable to all tutors). The work is also heavily negotiated: in the example, some steps we advised, like a larger programme review, were dismissed as options, but at the same time elements previously unmoveable, like reliance on the essay as a default text for ESB, became more flexible.

Although we regard the 2009-2010 academic year as a positive collaboration with Biology we are aware that its practical outcomes remain uncertain. We have been working with only five SBCS tutors (two most closely), and plans still need to be formulated and presented to the wider staff for agreement. Moreover, as with the earlier design of ESB and ISBS, we will not know how the module structure and materials are actually being interpreted by the approx 25 tutors involved in running small group tutorials. The way in which handed-down teaching ideas and materials are "domesticated" by individual teachers is well acknowledged (Mangubhai et al., 2007) and we try to be aware of this in contributing to their design. It's also a fact that in the frequently changing structure of departments, staff often rotate teaching responsibilities, and the teaching materials and practices that are the result of collaboration with one group of teachers can be differently applied or conceived by new teachers on a course. At times this may happen in ways that are at odds with the original goals of the material or with TW philosophy, but may seem more appropriate for the new teacher or new context.

These insights bring us to the recognition that the virtue of collaboration does not so much lie in the artefacts (modules, materials) it generates, as in the ongoing transactions between individual teachers, students and those like us in the development role (see Peake & Horne, in press; also Cousin, 2008). Locating value here steers us away from a sense of "job done, problem solved" in accounting for our work.

As writing moves up the institutional agenda at QMUL we are a little cautious that its greater visibility in strategies and documents like the Statement of

Graduate Attributes may bring with it reductive demands to "solve the problem" of student writing, endorsing a view of writing as separate from learning more generally (see Mitchell, 2010). At the same time, however, our experience encourages us to be confident of our collaborative, negotiated approach to working with departments, our rejection of single or simple models of writing, and our emphasis instead on the potential for writing to play a highly integrative role in the complex jigsaw of university learning. In the next year or so we will see how the top-down agenda of the institution and the bottom-up practice in which we daily engage begin to marry up, and what adjustments we may need to make.

NOTES

1. A comprehensive account of the early history of Thinking Writing appears in Lisa Ganobcsik Williams' 2006 volume on teaching academic writing in the UK (Mitchell & Evison, 2006).

2. Others have reached similar conclusions. Peters (2009) reports on a qualitative study of staff development providers who report that "formal workshops" have been unsuccessful; Pilkington (2006, p. 304) suggests the cause may be "'workshop overload;"; and Layne et al. *(2002) that workshops are often one-off and "isolated" from the tutor's context, allowing "little interaction with peers."*

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