

Enhancing dialogic space in and beyond the tutorial

The following quotations from first year students illustrate some of the transition issues faced by students in their first term at Cambridge:

'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'

'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].'

'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.'

Being prepared (Ballinger 2003, Leese 2004, Booth, 2005), adapting to new expectations, particularly when they are often implicit (Lillis and Turner 2001), and understanding new discourses (Bartholomae 1986, Lea and Street 1998, Haggis 2006) are some of the issues highlighted, reflecting aspects of the situation across the UK higher education sector more generally.

The initial aim of the Transkills Project, established in 2008, 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 the explicit aim of the project to support all incoming undergraduates and not just those considered to

be 'at risk' (see Wingate 2012). In addition, the intention was to embed a scholarly model of support firmly based on our own institutional data and enhanced by current research into writing and transitions (see Pitkethley and Prosser 2001).

The Transkills Project has a particular focus on enhancing transitions to disciplinary writing practices and although it can be argued that the Cambridge tutorial offers an ideal dialogic space in which to discuss/learn/create subject content and knowledge, data from our context demonstrates that the same focus is not always given to writing. Indeed, as Russell et al. (2009) suggest, although the undergraduate courses of Oxford and Cambridge are 'writing intensive' they are not necessarily 'writing conscious' (p.402).

The project moves beyond a traditional skills-deficit model of writing, and aims to support students in learning to discuss and produce effective writing within their discipline. In addition, it aims to enhance 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 explicitly consider the tutor's own role in supporting student writers in transition. It provides an opportunity to support tutors in becoming more 'writing-conscious' (Russell et al. 2009).

In creating new 'spaces' for discussion of discipline-specific academic writing practices outside of the tutorial context in the form of workshops for both students and staff, an opportunity is provided for tutors to explicitly 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 can be adapted to support student writing in transition. Crucially, space is also created for explicit discussion of the dialogic nature of the tutorial where tutors can examine 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). Space is also created, outside of the tutorial context, for students to articulate their experience of the transition from A-level writing to writing within their discipline and

where students can reflect, with peers, on the goals of their writing and texts and their role as an active participant in the feedback process.

Although, arguably still marginal to the structures of the institution, the project has used an Academic Literacies framework to reframe discussion of academic writing practices beyond the tutorial and has also helped to demonstrate that the traditional apprenticeship model of implicit induction, traditionally relied upon in the tutorial context, is not always adequate despite having high-achieving students schooled in traditional 'essayist literacies' (Lillis 2001). It has afforded the opportunity to create discussion around perspectives on teaching at A-level and undergraduate level and the perceived gaps in between and move discussion towards practical strategies for teaching and learning within the tutorial.

In addition to the ways in which an Academic Literacies framework has informed our institutional provision of support for academic writing, it is important to note that the pedagogical application of the approach in this context is significant in extending the practical and theoretical reach of the Academic Literacies perspective away from its traditional focus on 'non-traditional' students to illustrate its effectiveness in establishing transformational spaces in an 'elite' context where all students are high-achieving.

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