Beyond Skills

John Hodgson and Ann Harris report on their study of student writing across the transition from post-16 to higher education

Seven years is a long time in education. When, in 2010, we invited readers of EnglishDramaMedia to participate in a project on the teaching of writing from A level through to University, we felt we were working with the grain of progress in post-16 and higher education. Following the curricular changes of 2008, A-level English Literature was now more in line with the practices of University English: significantly more reading was now required of Literature students, and the focus had shifted from the single text to a more cultural and contextual study, assessed in part through coursework. Thus we expected that a focus on literary writing across the transition would be beneficial. We were equally optimistic about the possibilities of creative writing: an A-level course was in preparation and would, we thought, provide a bridge to students who wished to follow the highly popular and successful courses in creative writing found in universities. We did not anticipate that by 2017 coursework would have been reduced, the study of single texts (sometimes, admittedly, in comparison with others) would still characterise A level Literature, and the popularity of the subject among students would be declining. Nor did we imagine that A-level creative writing would perish shortly after its long gestation, its spirit kept alive by committed practitioners in the independent sector (for the Bristol AFA course, see http://bit.ly/creative-w).

So have we wasted our time? We were aware from the start of the project that the issues of student writing with which we were dealing were fundamental, and that changes in A level curricular arrangements would not be enough to resolve deep and continuing concerns about students' preparedness for university study, and especially for academic writing. Our interest, as members of NATE’s Post-16 and Higher
Beyond Skills: supporting student writing across the post-16 - university transition: page 2

Education Committee, was first pricked by Writing Matters, a report produced by the Royal Literary Fund in 2006. Based on the experience of published authors who had worked in universities to support students, this report spoke of students who had, it was claimed, "never been taught" to write, and to whom "the conventions of discursive prose were either alien or unknown". The introduction to the report laments the passing of an age when "the teaching of grammar and the formalities of written expression were... regarded as essential". New technology is also implicated: “If you spend much of your day listening to CDs, texting friends, speaking on your mobile, watching DVDs or surfing the Internet, then you are not reading in the traditional manner.”

One of our original intentions was to explore and challenge these dismal discourses of deficiency, which lamented both the supposed failure of schools and colleges to teach “fundamental”, “basic” writing and reading skills, and the insidious effect of digital technology. We decided to draw on and develop findings from two studies that reported the experience of students during the transition from A level to University English. The words of the students, recorded in hour-long focus group sessions during visits to eleven UK universities, suggested that many were not so much deficient as confused. Every aspect of their lives was affected by the experience of moving from a (usually local) sixth form or further education college to the accommodation and practices of mass higher education. Their private and public lives were configured in new ways, and they experienced new and powerful institutional expectations.

Of course, they had already experienced institutional power in their educational experience. Students in every focus group reported the moment when, early in their A level course, their teacher had written or displayed the assessment objectives for the course as stated by Ofqual (the UK examinations regulator), communicated by the awarding bodies (examination boards) and enforced by Ofsted (the school inspection agency). They frequently reported that writing their A level English Literature essays was a “tick-box” exercise (the word was used repeatedly) to demonstrate compliance with the assessment objectives. Many were glad to have transcended the “tick-box” approach of their A level studies, but felt that they would have appreciated more help
in orientating themselves to the university study of English. A final year student said that the problem of transition was not merely the amount of reading required, but "trying to understand what they are looking for and even what you should be reading". A second year student said she would have liked to have had "just a general idea of what you are working towards". One student appealed for "a summary lecture at the beginning, so you know what direction you’re meant to be heading and where you’re aiming for, as opposed to floating along and hoping you’ll have an epiphany or something". While some students were excited by literary theory ("the whole poststructuralism thing was huge to me, it opened my eyes," said one), others found it "really difficult". One student said that she had come to understand that the literary-cultural concepts were not really difficult: "It’s just the phrasing they used to make it sound really heavy".

After a considerable amount of further research, during which we triangulated the words of students in the focus groups with their writing practice as revealed by their essays, we came to the conclusion that an epistemological approach to student academic literacy promised more than the deficiency view of an intrinsic lack of writing “skills”. We made two suggestions.

Firstly, tutors should be clear about the epistemology of the subject they are teaching. The first problem that students encounter when approaching an essay is to know what they should say. Given the extent to which the philosophy of Cultural Studies has imbued the humanities and social sciences, a more explicit acknowledgement of key terms and concepts would be helpful to many students. As Gary Snapper has suggested, an explanatory focus in the first year on the underlying philosophy of the subject would help students make the changes in their mind-set necessary to understand the discipline in which they are engaged. The virtual learning environment could be more imaginatively used to support students’ initiation into this aspect of academic literacy.

Secondly, there are certain generic characteristics of academic writing that transcend disciplines and can be taught. As a student of English Literature and Publishing suggested, even a marketing report has similarities to an academic essay: “I take a
theory about social behaviour and apply it to a marketing context.” Tutors can reflect on their own academic writing in order to help students develop a thesis, construct an introductory paragraph, interrogate concepts and develop an argument - and to consider, in the age of social networking and multimodal communication, the provision of some alternatives to the academic essay which are congruent with student experience and contemporary society. A greater emphasis on low-stakes, collaborative, formative writing, for informal and peer assessment, would surely improve the experience of tutors as well as students.

Our project finishes, then, with a more limited outcome than we had originally hoped. Rather than heralding a new progressive coherence between the pre-university and university study of English, and a common approach to writing across the transition, we find ourselves recommending ways of ameliorating differences in principle and practice that remain embedded in the institutions of the post-16 school and the academy. The recent government-imposed changes in A level English courses, where nearly all assessment now depends on terminal examinations, makes the writing transition for students more difficult. The lack of opportunity for pre-university students to take courses in Creative Writing makes the comparison with university English more stark. It is hard to believe that, only a decade ago, government policy was to require universities to govern and manage the provision of A level courses, in the interests of curricular coherence and progression.

However, English teachers are used to working against the grain. The NATE Post-16 and HE Committee argued in our text-message: The Future of A Level English (2005) for a coherent, integrated A level course in English Language and Literature that would offer a qualification in communication and cultural studies appropriate to a wide range of students of the new school leaving age. Integrated courses in Language and Literature are developing in a number of universities: see, for example, the Integrating English website at https://www.integratingenglish.com/. Meetings and conferences between teachers from both the post-16 and HE sectors offer opportunities for discussion and collaboration. In November of this year, the Post-16
Beyond Skills: supporting student writing across the post-16 - university transition: page 5

and HE Committee will run its second annual day conference for teachers on both sides of the transition (for details, please see below).

Given the difficulties under which teachers in the UK currently work, the practice of student writing across the Post-16 to HE transition might seem a minor concern. But the illogical contradictions of current curricular arrangements will need to change as the needs of young people moving from early years of secondary school into higher education become more apparent. Listening to what they have to say would be a good start.

The Post-16 & HE Day Conference will be held at Aston University on 11 November 2017. Details and tickets: http://bit.ly/2post16

For the NATE Post-16 English blog, go to: http://bit.ly/post16blog

Publications referred to in the above article include:


Hodgson, J. & Harris, A. (2012) Improving student writing at HE: putting literacy studies to work. English in Education 46 (1)

Hodgson, J. and Harris, A. (2013) ‘It is hard to know what you are being asked to do.’ Deciphering codes, constructing schemas. English in Education 47(1)