Swimming with the sharks

helping students in infested waters
Illustrated with examples from:

1. One type of academic activity which contains an element of risk
2. Strategies used by competent students to steer a course through this activity, and thus (perhaps) improve their chances of survival
The BAWE corpus
www.coventry.ac.uk/bawe

- 6,506,995 words
- 2,896 texts
- 2,761 assignments
- 30+ disciplines
- 13 genre families
- 4 levels of study
The essayist tradition

- **logic** over emotion; **academic truth** (published theory and research) over personal experience;
- **linearity** over circularity; **explicitness** .... over evocation;
- **closing down of possible meanings** rather than open-endedness;
- **certainty** over uncertainty; **formality** over informality; **competitiveness** over collaboration.

(Lillis, 2001)
On the whole…

Student writing in the BAWE corpus
- is formal, competitive, logical
- becomes increasingly ‘literate’ and has increasingly fewer narrative features
- does not refer to personal experience
but

the Personal Development Planning initiative has different requirements -

It wants students to reflect on their own life experiences i.e. the processes by which they acquired general transferable skills
The reflective cycle (after Gibbs, 1988)

**Description**
What happened?

**Action Plan**
If it happens again what would you do?

**Feelings**
What were your feelings?

**Evaluation**
What was good and bad about the experience?

**Conclusion**
What could you have done differently or in addition?

**Analysis**
What can you learn from the event?
Donald Schön’s “swampy lowlands”

“In the varied topography of professional practice, there is the high, hard ground overlooking the swamp. On the high ground, manageable problems lend themselves to solution through the application of research-based theory and technique. In the swampy lowland, messy, confusing problems defy technical solution.”
Reflective practice

- logic v. emotion;
- academic truth v. personal experience;
- linearity v. circularity;
- explicitness v. evocation;
- closing down of meanings v. open-endedness;
- certainty v. uncertainty;
- formality v. informality;
- competitiveness v. collaboration.
The risks of writing reflectively for assessment

- Could require you to share rather private personal information
- Could require you to admit to “messy, confusing problems”, reflecting badly on yourself
- Could suggest that you have failed to embrace the essayist tradition
It’s not surprising that some students resist!

“I’ve got 2,500 words to write, I’ve left it till the last minute and it’s being assessed. It’s the way they write the questions: it’s a horrible mix of NVQ-style competences, develop a portfolio of evidence, and questions about that invite you to write about how you feel not what you think or believe. It’s really insidious.”

(Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009 p103-4)
How can I be totally free to express myself when I have to make this piece of work comply to set regulations and guidelines?

Why should I have my true feelings marked and graded?

(3rd year Theatre student)
the graduate job market seems to require reflective writing.....:

- Tell us about an experience and feedback, which you feel significantly impacted on your development. ......
- Give us an example of when you have worked successfully as part of a team or in a partnership. In your example explain clearly the relationships and interactions that took place.......
- Describe for us a time of complex change when you were expected to take on new tasks and responsibilities.

(British Gas Graduate Programme 2009)
Please describe a specific situation that demonstrates how you go about understanding customer needs and expectations and go on to exceed them.

Describe a time when you had to persuade a person or group to accept a decision they were initially reluctant to consider.

How do you think your skills, knowledge and experience can contribute to your chosen part of the business i.e. HR; Finance or Marketing, Sales & Customer Services?

(Royal Mail Group Graduate Programme 2009)
And for doctors…

Describe a situation, not necessarily clinical, where you personally felt challenged and under pressure. Describe how you responded. What did you learn from this experience and how will this benefit you as a foundation doctor?

/Foundation Applicants’ Handbook, October 2008/*
Writing in the BAWE corpus

Distribution of Genre Families

- case study
- critique
- design specification
- empathy writing
- essay
- exercise
- explanation
- literature survey
- methodology recount
- narrative recount
- problem question
- proposal
- research report
Reflective writing

- texts which draw on personal feelings and experiences to evaluate the self –
- (i.e. not those which primarily evaluate entities, propositions, the behaviour of others, drawing on experimental data and/or academic readings)
Reflective writing in BAWE occurs in:

the Narrative Recount genre family

e.g.

- “Reflective Piece for Starting and Running a Business” (Engineering)
- “Individual reflective report on the process of team work and team work skills” (Health)
Also found within assignments belonging to other genre families e.g.

- “Personal Career Plan and Reflective Commentary” (Hospitality and Leisure Tourism Management: Explanation)
- “Learning Process” (Business: Critique)
- “Feedback” (Computer Science: Essay)
It takes such forms as

- Diaries of practical sessions
- Diaries of teamwork sessions
- Reflections on overseas visits, coursework, patient care
- Self-appraisals of work performance, interviewing technique, career prospects
- Commentaries on other, non-reflective texts
Not just for the applied disciplines.....
Examples found in:

- Archaeology
- Architecture
- Business
- Chemistry
- Computer Science
- Cybernetics
- Education
- Engineering
- English
- Health
- HLTM
- Linguistics
- Medicine
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The “PDP subcorpus”

- 86,795 words
- Length from about 200 words to 6,748 words
- In 59 files.
- From 13 disciplines
Top 20 positively key words

1. I
2. MY
3. ME
4. TEAM
5. GROUP
6. HAD
7. FEEL
8. WE
9. WORK
10. OUR
11.  
12.  
13.  
14.  
15.  
16.  
17.  
18.  
19.  
20. SKILLS
21. AM
22. LEARNING
23. WAS
24. INTERVIEW
25. FELT
26. RAILS
27. NURSES
28. MYSELF
29. ABOUT
## Top 20 negatively key words

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<td>SYSTEM</td>
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<td>BETWEEN</td>
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<td>NATURE</td>
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Common 4-grams

- I WAS ABLE TO
- THE REST OF THE
- I WOULD LIKE TO
- WILL BE ABLE TO
- I WILL BE ABLE
- I FEEL THAT I

- I FEEL THAT THIS
- I WILL TRY TO
- IN ORDER TO IMPROVE
- MEMBER OF THE GROUP
- HAVE LEARNT A LOT
- IT WOULD HAVE BEEN
PDP writing has to

indicate participation in the reflective cycle (showing recognition of “messy, confusing problems”)

BUT AT THE SAME TIME

present the writer in a good light (for assessment, and in preparation for the job market)
How do writers achieve this?

- by shifting responsibility
- by telling a story with a happy ending
- by careful selection of ‘the semantic resources used to negotiate emotions, judgements, and valuations’ (Martin, 2000)
Disguised agency: “It would have been” v. “I should have”

- Ideally it would have been beneficial to record the interview on a camcorder (3069b)
- Also at the beginning of the interview it would have been better to state how long it was likely to last. (3030b)
Personally, I have to admit that, because of the fact that I lacked the practice that input and output offers to a learner, I should have invested more time and effort to the learning process (6024a)

On hindsight, I should not have let things slide in the weeks preceding the upper level pitch, and made sure we stayed on track, and not done things last minute. (0424c)
Sharing the blame

- This was possibly an issue we should have addressed early in order to maintain some professionalism and structure to the group (0354a)
- In hindsight we should have mentioned the noise levels during our interview (3030b)
- A customer didn't want caraway seeds on their carrots, but all the portions had been made with caraway seeds. We should have considered that a customer may not like caraway seeds. (3101b)
Disguised agency: passive constructions

- It is not envisaged that any specification changes would be necessary, but it is possible (as the author has little previous experience in these areas) that the time required has been underestimated and therefore that these phases may take longer than anticipated (0263f)
Lots of strong feeling!

Lonely

Anguish

Humiliation

Fear

Surprised

Anger

Frustration

Worried

Desperate
Ist person and negative AFFECT for feelings the reader might sympathise with…. 

- I was a bit nervous [AFFECT: security -: disposition] because we were the first group to go, and I felt slightly disadvantaged [AFFECT: security -: disposition] (0424c)

- I was upset [AFFECT: unhappiness: disposition] that the person who was supposed to work on that aspect didn’t look into it… (0354a)

- I found it very frustrating [AFFECT: satisfaction -: disposition] that she didn't contribute to group communications (3092d)

- Joe was in charge of the finances; Ben was all over the Design. Apart from this, the other two didn't really do much. I was quite disappointed [AFFECT: satisfaction -] that they wouldn't get more involved.
1st person and positive AFFECT for feelings the reader might approve of…. 

- This assignment has left me with a genuine interest [AFFECT: satisfaction +] in the area of international strategies and strategic thinking, which I would like to explore further [AFFECT: irrealis inclination +] (0155b)

- Posting on fora is not something I tend to do, but it was strangely enjoyable (6101c)
BUT when the feeling does not reflect well on the writer….

AFFECT (the expression of emotion) tends to become institutionalised as JUDGEMENT (evaluation of behaviour) or APPRECIATION (expression of taste) (Martin 2000, 2003)
One area I found difficult [APPRECIATION: reaction -] was that sometimes too much was expected of me [JUDGEMENT: capacity -] in terms of my ability (3101d).

I feel the interview also gave us an opportunity to build on our team building skills and organisational skills. I however, feel that I am a very independent person [JUDGEMENT: normality +] and I work better on my own. Yet within this profession it's not possible to work on my own and so it has helped me [APPRECIATION: valuation +] to try and improve my skills and confidence of working within a group and learning to listen to other people's opinions (3059a).
What about the reflective cycle?
Triumph over adversity

Moving into the world of full time work after my first year at university was quite a shock. The first few weeks were busy with me settling into a new job and new town. I soon discovered that I enjoyed the set routine that comes with a full time job and knowing that time outside work was my own.

(3101d)
Enthusiasm for the future

- I have spent 10 sessions in each section. They have taught me **lessons that I will be able to use** in the future, in my career in the hospitality industry. (3101b)

- I hope that in future **I will be able to creatively engage** in professional work (3113a)

- I am acutely aware of the increased expectations of third year students and the impending expectations of qualifying and hope that by focusing on a personal characteristic I feel needs attention **I will be able to develop** both personally and professionally. (3092g)
Writers swimming with the sharks

- BAWE corpus writers demonstrate mastery of a wide range of linguistic resources in order to present themselves in an appropriate light, as reflective students and as reflective job applicants.

- Are they sincere, or are they just playing the game?
Are these pieces too ‘polished’?

“Is it not possible that tidying up uncertain situations and unassociated ideas may be indicative of a failure to deal with the complexity of the world, and a desire to assert the self, rather than reveal/discover it?”

(Evans 2006)
But… they probably serve their purpose!
As EAP practitioners we can

- Try to understand the purposes and motivations behind the tasks that subject specialists set
- Make overt those strategies which wily native speakers use covertly
- Help our students to become investigators and negotiators of discourse
That way they can choose the role they want to play