Variation in disciplinary culture: university tutors’ views on assessed writing tasks

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Introduction

Most empirical research supports the view that there are important cultural differences between disciplinary groupings. These differences are apparent to many of those involved in higher education research and staff development (e.g. Lattuca and Stark, 1994; Braxton, 1995; Neumann, 2001; Neumann et al., 2002), and also to faculty members involved in the teaching of the various disciplines. QAA (n.d.) benchmarking statements reveal important contrasts in disciplinary identity and practice, and Healey (2000: 173) claims that ‘there is a strong perception among [academic] staff that there are significant differences among disciplines in what academics do and how these activities are described and valued’.

Variation across disciplines is frequently described in terms of the broad groupings derived by Becher (1989) from the earlier work of Biglan (1973) and Kolb (1981). Becher’s typology classifies disciplines according to whether they are hard or soft (on the basis of their level of paradigm development), and whether they are pure or applied (on the basis of the extent to which they are concerned with practical application). Braxton (1995) represents the hard disciplines as being characterised by greater concern for career development and cognitive goals (such as the learning of facts and concepts), and the soft disciplines as being characterised by greater concern for general education development, character development, critical thinking and ‘scholarly’ activities (such as the reading of research articles). Squires (2005) draws a distinction between the pure disciplines and the applied ‘professional’ disciplines such as Education and Medicine, concluding that whereas the primary concern in the pure disciplines is to interpret or understand the world, ‘the professions differ from other disciplines in being concerned primarily with acting rather than knowing’ (2005: 130). According to Squires, professional practice needs to be fine-tuned to meet the requirements of each new situation; its unpredictable
and irreversible nature (you can’t ‘repeat’ a patient or a student) also leads to a greater need for reflection.

The same sort of variation across the hard/soft and pure/applied categories was observed by Smart and Ethington (1995), who gathered opinions on the goals of undergraduate education from over 4000 university faculty members who regularly taught undergraduate students. Responses were reduced to three factors: ‘knowledge acquisition’ (the acquisition of multidisciplinary general knowledge), ‘knowledge application’ (the in-depth knowledge of a specific subject that prepares the student for a career), and ‘knowledge integration’ (the use of knowledge to think creatively). These factors were found to vary in importance according to discipline, with soft and applied disciplines placing greater emphasis on knowledge acquisition, and hard disciplines having more concern for knowledge application. Knowledge integration and application were both perceived to be more important in the applied disciplines than in the pure.

These differences of approach and emphasis have also been observed in published academic writing. Bazerman (1981) and Becher (1987), for example, found that whereas expert science writers, working within a well-developed paradigm, assumed that their readers shared the same body of knowledge as themselves, writers in the social sciences needed to persuade readers to accept findings based on methodologies or theoretical frameworks not universally accepted in the discipline, whilst writers in the humanities tried to convince their readers of interpretations they had arrived at through personal insight. Purves (1986: 39) comments on the clear distinctions between scholarly journals in different disciplines, and describes each discipline as ‘a rhetorical community, which is to say a field with certain norms, expectations and conventions with respect to writing’.

Disciplinary variation in the writing of doctoral students has been examined by Parry (1998), who looked at focus, language, structure, and citation practices in 24 theses (eight from science, social science and the humanities). By and large, her findings support the established distinctions between disciplinary groupings. She found that theses in the sciences were mainly placed within an established paradigm, whilst social scientists worked with ‘co-existing but competing paradigms’ and in the humanities paradigms were found to be ‘individualistic’ or were replaced by ‘intellectual fashions’. Parry’s findings are complex, however, and there was some overlapping of features across the groupings. For example she classed the text structure of the science theses as ‘report and explanation’, that of the social science theses as ‘explanation and argument’, and that of the humanities theses as ‘argument with recounting and narrative’ (Parry, 1998: 297)
Purves (1986: 39) points out that ‘instruction in any discipline is acculturation, or the bringing of the student into the ‘interpretative community’ of the discipline’. This may be a long process, especially as undergraduate students are often required to write in a much wider range of knowledge areas than the experts do. Variation in epistemology and discourse occurs not only across disciplines, but also within disciplines, and students may be required to apply different sets of rhetorical conventions to meet the demands of different course modules. Neumann et al. (2002: 407) note that some disciplines straddle categories (for example Biology, which has both hard/pure and soft/pure elements), and some disciplines contain ‘deviant’ specialisms (for example Sociometrics, as a hard/pure subfield within Sociology which is predominantly soft/pure). Further evidence of the crossover between hard/soft and pure/applied divides can be found in the titles of the following undergraduate course modules (all within single-subject degree programmes at Warwick University):

- Human Computer Interaction (Computer Science)
- Mathematical Economics (Economics)
- Introduction to Mathematical Biology (Mathematics)
- Psychology and the Law (Psychology)
- Physics in Medicine (Physics)

As such titles suggest, boundaries between scholarly domains are permeable; Klein (1996: 42) writes of the ‘continued fissioning of knowledge into greater numbers of specialities’, and the ‘ontological gerrymandering’ that takes place to create new domains for subjects which do not share classical disciplinary characteristics.

Undergraduate modules for students from different disciplines could be regarded as further hindrance to the process of disciplinary acculturation. North (2005a, 2005b) examined an undergraduate course in the history of science, attended by students from both arts and science backgrounds. She found considerable linguistic and rhetorical variation in the writing produced by the two groups, and also noted that the arts students received higher marks for the course than their counterparts from the sciences, presumably because the academic conventions they had already mastered matched more closely to those of the course tutors.

Nevertheless there is also evidence that academics in different disciplines value many of the same qualities in the written assignments their students produce. Elander et al. (2006: 72) analysed published assessment criteria in psychology, business studies and geography and found that ‘critical thinking, use of language, structuring and argument’ were ‘core criteria that have a central role in the shared perception of what is important in good student writing’. In interviews with academics in the humanities, sciences and social
Lea and Street (2000) found that ‘structure,’ ‘argument’ and ‘clarity’ were commonly identified as crucial to student writing success (although their informants had difficulty in explaining what a well-developed argument actually looks like in a written assignment).

Surveys of student writing tasks have noted these variations within and connections across disciplines. Horowitz (1986), for example, found many of the same broad types of undergraduate task recurring in different fields. Horowitz’s ‘synthesis of multiple sources’, which he describes as a sort of ‘essay’, was set in hard, soft, pure and applied disciplines, although some disciplines, such as Psychology, also set tasks of many other different types. Similarly Currie (1993) found a wide range of conceptual activity and genre in assignments for an introductory course in Organisational Behaviour, although in this case all papers were referred to simply as ‘assignments’, a label which did not accurately reflect the characteristics of the skills required to carry out the writing tasks’ (1993: 12). Stierer (2000) found that for an Open University MA programme in Education a single student could be required to produce up to 12 different genres, including, for example, essays, reports, research proposals, critical literature reviews, personal position papers, and case studies.

It would appear that the variety of written tasks is on the increase, particularly within emergent disciplines (Baynham, 2000). Lea and Stierer (2000) link this escalation to recent rapid changes in British higher education, arguing that applied disciplines are under pressure to prove both their academic status and their practical relevance, resulting in tensions between ‘real world’ and ‘academic’ learning, and between ‘traditional essayist genres of academic writing and new styles of writing developed to support the acquisition and consolidation of professional knowledge’ (2000: 9). Evans and Abbott (1998: 115) ascribe the change to ‘the increasing pressure for experimentation in relation to course design, delivery and assessment’, but point out that innovation has often been promoted without any clear justification – much of the published material on alternative approaches to teaching and learning is not, they claim, based on findings from empirical research (1998: 17).

Undergraduate student writing is clearly complex, with many variations in practice dependent not only on discipline, level of study and educational approach, but also on the nature of the higher education institution, the particular focus of the department within that institution, and the idiosyncrasies of the lecturers who assign written work. In this paper we are able to provide a more comprehensive inventory of genres of student writing than has previously been documented in a British university context, and identify, from the perspective of the academic, a number of important trends in the assignment of student writing tasks.
The study

As part of an ESRC funded project entitled ‘An investigation of genres of assessed writing in British Higher Education’ we have been conducting semi-structured interviews with academic staff responsible for course planning and assessment at undergraduate level, to discover views on the types of assignments students are required to write, perceptions of the differences between assignment types, and the qualities valued in student writing at various levels. In the process of interviewing we have been particularly attentive to responses that reflect fundamental differences of approach between the soft and hard disciplines, or the pure and applied, or alternatively any indication of commonality and shared values. Our interviews also offer academics the opportunity to reflect on changes and developments in student writing tasks, including the introduction of new genres. (See Appendix A for interview protocol.)

This paper reports on 55 interviews conducted in 20 departments at the Universities of Warwick, Reading and Oxford Brookes. To assist in relating our findings to the literature on student writing practices and disciplinary variation, we assigned subject areas to disciplinary groupings as indicated in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disciplinary grouping</th>
<th>Subject area</th>
<th>Number of interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arts and Humanities</td>
<td>Archaeology</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>English Studies</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>History</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Philosophy</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Publishing</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Theatre Studies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life Sciences</td>
<td>Biological Sciences</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Food Sciences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Health</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Medicine</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Sciences</td>
<td>Computing</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Physics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Sciences</td>
<td>Anthropology</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Economics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hospitality and Tourism</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Law</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Sociology</td>
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Table 1: Subject areas and disciplinary groupings
Findings

In what follows, we first review the types of assignment we found and their distribution across subject areas. We then discuss the three main groups of assignments: ‘pedagogic’ genres such as the traditional student essay, ‘research-academic’, and ‘professional’ genres. This is followed by observations on four innovative trends identified, and two common values expressed.

Assignment types and spread

Although in some modules students are assessed partially on oral presentations, or entirely by examination, for the majority of staff we talked to ‘assignment writing is the core of how we examine and assess students’ (Sociology). As Table 2 shows, in some disciplines such as Philosophy the essay is the principal assignment type undergraduates write, whereas in other areas undergraduates are expected to produce assignments of many different kinds.

The labels used for the assignments are those from the departmental discourse communities. Such labels are known to be unreliable indicators of genre across disciplines (Currie, 1993: 102), as many tutors recognised. Some tutors explicitly differentiated ‘research projects’ from ‘project reports’, although these terms were not always used consistently and others realised that what they called ‘essays’ others might call ‘projects’, or (in the case of longer essays) ‘dissertations’. The examples in Table 2 have been selected to illustrate not only the range of labels, but also the spread of assignment types across the disciplines.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment Type</th>
<th>Disciplines</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Report</td>
<td>Computing, Food Sciences, Hospitality and Tourism, Law, Psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laboratory Report</td>
<td>Archaeology, Biology, Physics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Report</td>
<td>Biology, Economics, Engineering, Mathematics, Sociology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Project</td>
<td>Biology, Mathematics, Theatre Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dissertation</td>
<td>Anthropology, Archaeology, Biology, Computing, Law, Medicine, Publishing, Sociology, Theatre Studies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Variation in disciplinary culture

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group Project</th>
<th>Archaeology, Engineering, Health, Physics, Publishing</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poster</td>
<td>Anthropology, Biology, Engineering, Mathematics, Physics, Psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book Review</td>
<td>History, Psychology, Sociology, Theatre Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Website Evaluation</td>
<td>Medicine, Theatre Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem Sheets</td>
<td>Biosciences, Economics, Food Sciences, Hospitality and Tourism, Mathematics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case Studies</td>
<td>Health, Publishing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case Notes, Draft Appeal to House of Lords, Advice Notes to a client, Submissions in preparation for a case, Moots, Problem Question (judgment),</td>
<td>Law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field Study/ Ethnography</td>
<td>Sociology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patient Case Report</td>
<td>Medicine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letter from publisher to author</td>
<td>Publishing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective writing / journal / blog</td>
<td>Engineering, English Studies, Hospitality and Tourism, Philosophy, Medicine, Theatre Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical evaluation (of own production or practical task)</td>
<td>Anthropology, English Studies, Computing, Theatre Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing Proposal / Plan</td>
<td>Engineering, Publishing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiction</td>
<td>Sociology, Law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Press Release, Fact Sheet, Technical Abstract, persuasive writing</td>
<td>Biology, Physics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letter of advice to friend written from 1830s perspective; Maths in Action project (lay audience)</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Assignment types and spread
These diverse assignment types differ not only in rhetorical structure, but also in audience and purpose. In Engineering, for instance, scientific papers are written to report findings to an academic audience, funding proposals are written to persuade a professional readership, posters are designed to inform a lay audience (e.g. visitors to a transport museum), and reflective journals are written for personal and professional development. The writing process also differs. Some assignments are written individually whereas others involve group work.

Variation is particularly typical of the applied disciplines where, as Lea and Stierer (2000: 9) point out, there is inherent tension between the discourse requirements of the professional and the academic communities (although the trend to develop ‘transferable skills’ is evident in most disciplines). Some tutors were proud to draw attention to writing tasks that indicate the practical relevance of their degree programmes. Publishing tutors, for example, argued that there was ‘little point’ in writing academic essays in some modules, as Publishing is a vocational degree and assignments ‘try to replicate what goes on’. In contrast, tutors of Hospitality and Tourism, an ‘emergent’ discipline (Baynham, 2000), seemed more concerned to emphasise the academic respectability of their programme, commenting on the need for students to grasp the link between practice and theory.

Our interviews with tutors suggest that university writing can be grouped into ‘pedagogic’ genres such as the traditional student essay; ‘research-academic’ genres such as the research project and book review; and ‘professional’ genres such as moots in law, patient case reports, and critical evaluation of computer code design. In addition to these three groups, we identified trends towards the use of tasks involving fiction, self-reflection, writing for a general audience, and / or writing relating to the use of new technologies. These groups and trends are now presented.

Pedagogic genres

The prototypical pedagogic genre is the traditional student essay. It is used by all departments in our sample with the exception of Physics, which has only recently abandoned it. When defined by tutors, it is taken to be discursive prose. Length and frequency varies: some tutors expect short essays every two weeks, others require a 3000-word essay per module per term, and possibly one longer ‘essay’ of 8,000–10,000 words in the final year. ‘Law as a discipline is very focused on adherence to the brief.’ Biology is equally in favour of concision in that ‘there has never been a penalty for an essay being too short’.
Essays have a basic, generally three-part structure:

- Introduction, body, conclusion (Biological Sciences)
- Introduction, logical sequence of argument, conclusion (Medicine)
- Argument, counter-argument, conclusion (Hospitality and Tourism)

This general structure allows for more variation in approach than in other assessed genres:

- Greater scope than other assignment types in terms of what they’re writing about (Engineering)
- Generally more ‘rangy’, with a freer structure (Law)
- Less prescribed structure (Theatre Studies)
- More flexible than practical reports; possibly addressing only a subset of the classic RA (Psychology)
- More open-ended, with less structured investigation (Hospitality and Tourism)

An Engineering tutor suggested that students find essays frightening for this very reason: ‘Having become accustomed to writing structured reports, the prospect of an essay on professional ethics is daunting’. In recognition of this open-endedness, problem sheets may be assigned instead of essays because they are ‘shorter, more specific and more direct’ (Health).

Essays were also thought to involve critical thinking:

- ‘A chance to show … that you can think deeply about a subject’ (Anthropology)
- Evidence of independent thought, assessing a particular debate, critical analysis (Archaeology)
- ‘The traditional Law essay would probably take the form of a critical discussion of a proposition’ (Law)
- ‘It has an argument, a critical argument, critique is crucial’ (Sociology).
- ‘An essay has got to be an argument of some sort … not simply reportage or narrative’ (Theatre Studies)

Particularly in essays, progression is marked by an increasingly critical and original response:

- ‘We’d expect much more of a critique of their work from a third year … [student] than we would from a first year’ (Computing)
- Students become ‘more critical in the final stages’ (Hospitality and Tourism)
First year writing should be accurate, concise, explicit, but by the third year ‘originality should be added to the mixture’ (Psychology)

• Good students ‘develop a genuine personal voice’ (Theatre Studies)

Within and across departments, however, there are different views on originality. For instance, student opinions may or may not be valued:

I am not overly concerned about students’ own opinions – it’s more about structure, argumentation and engagement with the text, but some colleagues are more interested in what students think about something. (Sociology)

In Theatre Studies, essay writing is used to develop an appropriate balance of critical rigour, open-mindedness, and creative imaginative responses (‘the ability to think outside the box’). Similarly in English Studies a balance is sought between students’ own viewpoints and substantiation from and engagement with the field.

The value of the essay would appear to lie in its relatively loosely structured ability to display critical thinking and development of an argument within the context of the curriculum.

Research-academic genres

In contrast to the pedagogic genres of student essay and problem sheet, a project report in Psychology is ‘structured like an academic article’ and must adhere to the conventions of a publishable scientific paper. This view is one that resonates across a number of departments: ‘Over time, student writing should approximate ever more closely to the writing that academics submit for publication in learned/scientific journals’ (Economics). In Psychology, project reports, project reports and essays are all meant to be written in the style of the classic research article, and in Food Sciences student writing is expected to conform to ‘the style you’d expect in a research paper’ – ‘publishable in style, but not in content’. Biology students are advised to ‘write in the style of current opinion journals’. Physics tutors reported ‘trying to get [students] to write a scientific paper – as might be published in a scientific journal, for an audience of their peers’. However, although publication constitutes recognition of success in academia, opinions varied as to the likelihood of this occurring at undergraduate level. According to Psychology tutors only a minority of undergraduate students reach publication standard, whereas in Biochemistry, a ‘flagship’ within Biology, it was reported that ‘many year three essays are of publishable quality’. Clearly although the research article is used as a model in these disciplines, the purpose of writing is educational, and publication is not a primary aim.
The typical research-academic genres identified in our interviews are scientific reports (which mirror research articles), and book reviews. In certain disciplines, case studies may also prove to belong in this category. Reports and case studies, however, may also be labels for assignments which emulate professional rather than academic genres.

**Professional genres**

Professional genres position student writers as professionals. In the Medical School assignments such as the case report, involving patient description and a management plan, are used to assess competence to progress as a medical practitioner. Engineering students are required to consider their legal liability for the recommendations they make in their site investigation reports. Publishing students write publishing project proposals and letters to authors, in the persona of a publisher. Law students write case notes and appeals, which are ‘common forms of legal writing’, as well as ‘problem questions’ which apply the law ‘rather as barristers and solicitors have to do’.

These professional genres tend to have clear schema, often made explicit by section headings. For instance, in Law the three sections of an appeal are ‘precedent, principle and policy’, while in case notes they are ‘facts, decisions and implications’. Highly structured genres present very different demands to the essay, and are assessed by different criteria. Practice in the applied disciplines can be contrasted with the ‘purer’ approach taken in Theatre Studies, where an informant spoke of his dislike of ‘writing to a formula’ which he can ‘tell a mile off’. Several members of Theatre Studies explicitly valued writing that takes risks, and encouraged students to ‘write dangerously’ (a positive example of this being one student’s analysis of ‘King Kong as a Wagnerian Opera’).

Some informants spoke of progression towards employment. In Engineering, for example, formative writing tasks in the first year progressed through structured academic laboratory reports to assignments written for professional audiences in the final year.

**Innovative trends**

Evans and Abbot (1998) discuss the rise of the staff development industry and the increasing value placed on innovative practice in British higher education, particularly since the reforms of 1992. Our interviews also reflected this; some tutors were almost apologetic about their use of the ‘essay’, perceived as being ‘standard’ and ‘traditional’, and by implication unimaginative and old-fashioned:
‘The fact that essays are still used as the only mode by the majority of English literature assessors seems to me very limiting’. (English Studies)

‘It has been the convention to use essays. I would like to break away from that’. (Psychology)

‘We are a traditional department and we still use mainly essays and we’re very conscious that we would like to, and perhaps need to, do something about that. More and more colleagues are doing different things’. (Sociology)

Creative writing

Students in English Studies and Theatre Studies produce creative work and then critique their own output. More unexpected and rather experimental examples of innovation come from Sociology and Law, however. For instance in one Sociology module students may produce a piece of crime fiction (intended to demonstrate understanding of the sociological theories taught, and assessed on these terms rather than literary merit), and in another students are set a creative writing task which the tutor calls a ‘story’. In a recently approved Law module students are encouraged to produce a dramatic dissertation that takes the form of a playscript of the facts or trial of a legal case, together with a reflective commentary.

Empathy writing

In addition to the professional writing where students write assignments specific to their intended work situation, growing numbers of tutors offer assignments written for a general, non-professional, or non-academic audience. In Philosophy students are encouraged to write for educated peers: ‘if they can explain the essence of a debate to a fellow student in the hall of residence who is not studying Philosophy, they have understood what they have read’, whereas in Physics, Biology, Mathematics and Engineering we see students writing, informed by their disciplines, for school children, friends, museums, or newspapers. Here they have to consider not only scientific content, but also the audience and purpose. Lea and Street (2000: 39) have coined the term ‘empathy writing’ for such new ways of communicating disciplines outside the academic community.
Reflective writing

A third type of innovation could be called reflective writing. This encompasses a range of assignment types, each of which relates to different strands within national initiatives in Personal (and Professional) Development Planning (PDP), defined by the Higher Education Academy (2005) as:

a structured and supported process undertaken by an individual to reflect upon their own learning, performance and / or achievement and to plan for their personal, educational and career development.

Reflection on learning appears in different guises in our interviews. Students may be asked to evaluate their own work (Computing, English Studies, Theatre Studies), to reflect on their experiences during group work (Engineering, Hospitality and Tourism), on the educational value of a practical task (Anthropology), or on past personal experiences (Medicine). Such writing may take the form of a learning journal, as Creme (2000) found in Social Anthropology courses at Sussex University. She points out how journals ‘foreground … the idea of writing as a process and a tool for learning rather than as a product and occasional demonstration of knowledge’ (Creme, 2000: 99).

Squires (2005) comments on the particular need for reflective practice in the professional disciplines, and the six Health and Social Welfare academics interviewed by Hoadley-Maidment (2000) ranked the ability to draw on personal experience very highly. According to our informants, however, medical students find this kind of writing particularly hard, because it differs so greatly from the factual reports they are used to writing in the pure sciences.

New technologies

New technologies can influence emergent assessment trends. For instance, with the introduction of weblogs or blogs for student writing as part of PDP at Warwick, some reflective writing has been submitted online, and there are indications this might become increasingly the norm (reflective journals in Engineering might move to blog format, for example). Website evaluations have been introduced in Medicine and Theatre Studies. This assignment type is similar to the book review, but with at least partially different evaluation criteria. Web-page design in Publishing certainly involves different skills, and reportedly appeals to students who feel less comfortable with academic essay writing. Powerpoint presentations are also increasingly assessed. These have not been included in our study – our current scope is solely written text – but the trend towards multimodal assignments is clear. While the innovations
described above are indicative of trends, a stronger consensus emerged in terms of common values.

**Common values**

Two themes emerged across the disciplines: Firstly, subject tutors take responsibility for introducing students to the expectations of writing in their subject area. Secondly there was a consensus on what constitutes ‘good’ writing.

**Learning discipline specifics**

Tutors across disciplines commented on the difference between university writing and A-level writing. In Theatre Studies, first-year essays were used to ‘make the break from A-level style of thinking’, and Physics tutors changed the laboratory report section heading ‘Materials and Methods’ to ‘Experimental Details’—‘that may well be the title they have used in school, and one that we try to beat out of them’. Requirements at A-Level relating to the use of secondary sources may also be very different, as tutors in Hospitality and Tourism and English Studies pointed out.

Tutors introduce students to the writing practices of their subject area in many ways. In English Studies and Philosophy there is explicit attention to pieces of writing that move students towards the essay as the final goal, such as reflective diaries, and responses to texts. In Sociology all students follow a Professional Skills Programme in their first year to learn what is expected in essays. Similarly in Philosophy students follow a first-year module entitled Doing Philosophy, where they work through a series of preparatory tasks building up to an essay every three weeks. Assignments called ‘critical review’ are set in Archaeology with the explicit goal of teaching students how to engage in critical reading and thinking.

Students also learn how written products are organised. In Law and Physics, among others, clear guidelines are given not only on the expected sections and subsections of specific genres such as Moots and Laboratory Reports, but also on the content and language expected in each section. Where tutors assume students are familiar with a text type, there may be less instruction, although Psychology tutors reported surprise that some students did not know the expected structure for a book review (summary plus evaluation). In History norms are not clear-cut and different tutors may give different advice. For instance one academic claimed to value ‘signposting of the argument’ and ‘flagging up of significant points’, but realised that some of his colleagues disliked scaffolding and did not feel the need to underline the structure of the argument.
Good writing

When we asked tutors about desirable characteristics of student writing, there was remarkable consistency within the group, and indeed with the literature. Economics tutors mentioned critical analysis and logical development, History tutors clarity of argument, taking the reader on ‘a journey through conflicting ideas’. Tutors in Sociology and Medicine valued ‘a clearly stated argument’. Engineering tutors liked succinct and well-structured writing, while Philosophy tutors liked clarity and clear signalling. These comments support Lea and Street’s (2000) findings regarding argument, structure and clarity. Next to coherent structure, the most frequently stated desirable quality was originality or creativity, and we have seen how this interacts with logical thinking. Other desirable qualities included ‘understanding’, ‘insight’, and ‘application’, as well as ‘succinct expression’ and ‘adherence to academic conventions’. Given the differences that have emerged surrounding writing purpose, audience and rhetorical structure, it is perhaps surprising that there are nevertheless shared qualities valued across the university. This is not at all to suggest that what counts as ‘good’ writing is similar across the disciplines, as tutors are well aware: ‘An excellent English student would still have to learn how to write in Law’.

Conclusion

This study acknowledges widespread use of a set of core assignment types that sit easily within the traditions of university education (essay, dissertation, book review, laboratory report). Writing of this type may simply serve as evidence of educational achievement, or it may reflect the output of the professional academic (we distinguish between ‘pedagogic’ genres and ‘research-academic’ genres). In addition the study identifies a substantial number of different ‘professional’ genres, reflecting the conventions and purposes of workplace texts, and also the assignment of ‘empathy’ writing tasks for general readerships. While pedagogic and research-academic genres tend to occur in the pure disciplines, and professional genres tend to occur within the applied disciplines, it is also the case that modules in some pure disciplines require writing for non-academic audiences, such as school children or museum visitors. Concern with the requirements of the world of work, together with trends towards increased reflective writing, seem to serve essentially formative, developmental and personal or professional development goals, as captured by recent PDP initiatives. We also note the use of creative writing tasks, even for students outside the humanities (Law, Medicine, Sociology), and an increasing emphasis on the creation and evaluation of multimodal and web-based texts.
The differences highlighted by Braxton (1995), Bazerman (1981) and Becher (1987) persist between those disciplines that engage in reporting facts within one paradigm, in comparison with those that require interpretation and reflection on ideas and texts within the context of competing paradigms. The danger for universities currently attempting to harmonise assessment criteria is the temptation to agree on the ‘common’ values and not interpret them sufficiently for students. Indeed one striking feature in our interviews was the sense in which tutors felt it was the subject area’s responsibility to introduce students to norms specific to their area, irrespective of norms in other areas. Some tutors did refer to faculty wide assessment criteria, but in their interpretation, they were always subject- (or module-) specific. In this way our study underscores the findings of others (e.g. Neumann et al., 2002) concerning the need for students to be alert to differences not only across subject areas, but also across assignments.

Notes
1 The ESRC funded project (RES-000-23-0800) aims to compile and analyse a corpus of ‘good’ student assignments, at all levels from first-year undergraduate to masters degree, across the disciplines. It aims to characterise proficient student writing produced for degree programmes in British universities in terms of genres and subgenres through interviews with members of the discourse communities (here university tutors), multidimensional analysis of registers, and systemic functional genre analysis. Further details can be found at www.warwick.ac.uk/go/BAWE.

References


**Appendix A: Academic interview guidance notes**

- What role does assignment-writing play in your department?
- What different types of written assignment do you set your students?
  - Could you tell us more about ZZ?
  - Are there other types of assignment task?
  - Do you set assignments of type [pre-existing genre] as well?
  - Do you use other formats, e.g. videos?
- How do the assignment types you set differ?
  - How could we tell a YY from an XX?
  - e.g. an experimental report from a case-study?
  - e.g. a critical review from an essay?
• What sort of differences do you expect to find between the written work of first or second year students and final-year undergraduates or masters-level students?

• What do you value most in student written work?

• What sorts of things do you most dislike in student’s written work?

• In your opinion, how much does presentation matter?

• How do the various assignment tasks reveal evidence of the qualities you value?

• Do you find that overseas students have particular problems with written assignments?
  o Do you have ways and means of helping them?

• Who should we talk to about collecting assignments?

• Is there a good time to collect assignments on module MM999?

• Are there any modules we should definitely include in our sample?
  o If so, which? and why?