

6 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

1 and irreversible nature (you can't 'repeat' a patient or a student) also leads to
2 a greater need for reflection.

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

16 These differences of approach and emphasis have also been observed in
17 published academic writing. Bazerman (1981) and Becher (1987), for example,
18 found that whereas expert science writers, working within a well-developed
19 paradigm, assumed that their readers shared the same body of knowledge as
20 themselves, writers in the social sciences needed to persuade readers to accept
21 findings based on methodologies or theoretical frameworks not universally
22 accepted in the discipline, whilst writers in the humanities tried to convince their
23 readers of interpretations they had arrived at through personal insight. Purves
24 (1986: 39) comments on the clear distinctions between scholarly journals in
25 different disciplines, and describes each discipline as 'a rhetorical community,
26 which is to say a field with certain norms, expectations and conventions with
27 respect to writing'.

28 Disciplinary variation in the writing of doctoral students has been examined
29 by Parry (1998), who looked at focus, language, structure, and citation practices
30 in 24 theses (eight from science, social science and the humanities). By and
31 large, her findings support the established distinctions between disciplinary
32 groupings. She found that theses in the sciences were mainly placed within
33 an established paradigm, whilst social scientists worked with 'co-existing
34 but competing paradigms' and in the humanities paradigms were found to be
35 'individualistic' or were replaced by 'intellectual fashions'. Parry's findings
36 are complex, however, and there was some overlapping of features across the
37 groupings. For example she classed the text structure of the science theses as
38 'report and explanation', that of the social science theses as 'explanation and
39 argument', and that of the humanities theses as 'argument with recounting and
40 narrative' (Parry, 1998: 297)

1 Purves (1986: 39) points out that ‘instruction in any discipline is accultura-
 2 tion, or the bringing of the student into the ‘interpretative community’ of the
 3 discipline’. This may be a long process, especially as undergraduate students
 4 are often required to write in a much wider range of knowledge areas than the
 5 experts do. Variation in epistemology and discourse occurs not only across
 6 disciplines, but also within disciplines, and students may be required to apply
 7 different sets of rhetorical conventions to meet the demands of different course
 8 modules. Neumann et al. (2002: 407) note that some disciplines straddle catego-
 9 ries (for example Biology, which has both hard/pure and soft/pure elements),
 10 and some disciplines contain ‘deviant’ specialisms (for example Sociometrics,
 11 as a hard/pure subfield within Sociology which is predominantly soft/pure).
 12 Further evidence of the crossover between hard/soft and pure/applied divides
 13 can be found in the titles of the following undergraduate course modules (all
 14 within single-subject degree programmes at Warwick University):

- 15 • Human Computer Interaction (Computer Science)
- 16 • Mathematical Economics (Economics)
- 17 • Introduction to Mathematical Biology (Mathematics)
- 18 • Psychology and the Law (Psychology)
- 19 • Physics in Medicine (Physics)

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

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

34 Nevertheless there is also evidence that academics in different disciplines
 35 value many of the same qualities in the written assignments their students
 36 produce. Elander et al. (2006: 72) analysed published assessment criteria in
 37 psychology, business studies and geography and found that ‘critical thinking,
 38 use of language, structuring and argument’ were ‘core criteria that have a
 39 central role in the shared perception of what is important in good student
 40 writing’. In interviews with academics in the humanities, sciences and social

1 sciences, Lea and Street (2000) found that ‘structure,’ ‘argument’ and ‘clar-
2 ity’ were commonly identified as crucial to student writing success (although
3 their informants had difficulty in explaining what a well-developed argument
4 actually looks like in a written assignment).

5 Surveys of student writing tasks have noted these variations within and
6 connections across disciplines. Horowitz (1986), for example, found many
7 of the same broad types of undergraduate task recurring in different fields.
8 Horowitz’s ‘synthesis of multiple sources’, which he describes as a sort of
9 ‘essay’, was set in hard, soft, pure and applied disciplines, although some
10 disciplines, such as Psychology, also set tasks of many other different types.
11 Similarly Currie (1993) found a wide range of conceptual activity and genre in
12 assignments for an introductory course in Organisational Behaviour, although
13 in this case all papers were referred to simply as ‘assignments’, a label which
14 did not ‘accurately reflect the characteristics of the skills required to carry out
15 the writing tasks’ (1993: 12). Stierer (2000) found that for an Open University
16 MA programme in Education a single student could be required to produce up to
17 12 different genres, including, for example, essays, reports, research proposals,
18 critical literature reviews, personal position papers, and case studies.

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

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

1 The study

2 As part of an ESRC funded project entitled ‘An investigation of genres of
3 assessed writing in British Higher Education’¹ we have been conducting semi-
4 structured interviews with academic staff responsible for course planning and
5 assessment at undergraduate level, to discover views on the types of assign-
6 ments students are required to write, perceptions of the differences between
7 assignment types, and the qualities valued in student writing at various levels.
8 In the process of interviewing we have been particularly attentive to responses
9 that reflect fundamental differences of approach between the soft and hard
10 disciplines, or the pure and applied, or alternatively any indication of commo-
11 nality and shared values. Our interviews also offer academics the opportunity
12 to reflect on changes and developments in student writing tasks, including the
13 introduction of new genres. (See Appendix A for interview protocol.)

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

Disciplinary grouping	Subject area	Number of interviews
Arts and Humanities	Archaeology	16
	English Studies	
	History	
	Philosophy	
	Publishing	
	Theatre Studies	
Life Sciences	Biological Sciences	10
	Food Sciences	
	Health	
	Medicine	
	Psychology	
Physical Sciences	Computing	14
	Engineering	
	Mathematics	
	Physics	
Social Sciences	Anthropology	15
	Economics	
	Hospitality and Tourism	
	Law	
	Sociology	

18
19 **Table 1: Subject areas and disciplinary groupings**

1 Findings

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

7 *Assignment types and spread*

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

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

Essay	Anthropology, Archaeology, Biology, Computing, Economics, Engineering, English Studies, Food Sciences, Health, History, Hospitality and Tourism, Law, Mathematics, Medicine, Philosophy, Psychology, Publishing, Theatre Studies
Report	Computing, Food Sciences, Hospitality and Tourism, Law, Psychology
Laboratory Report	Archaeology, Biology, Physics
Project Report	Biology, Economics, Engineering, Mathematics, Sociology
Research Project	Biology, Mathematics, Theatre Studies
Dissertation	Anthropology, Archaeology, Biology, Computing, Law, Medicine, Publishing, Sociology, Theatre Studies

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

1

2

Table 2: Assignment types and spread

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

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

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

29 *Pedagogic genres*

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

1 Essays have a basic, generally three-part structure:

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

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

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

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

20 Essays were also thought to involve critical thinking:

- 21 • 'A chance to show ... that you can think deeply about a subject'
22 (Anthropology)
- 23 • Evidence of independent thought, assessing a particular debate, critical
24 analysis (Archaeology)
- 25 • 'The traditional Law essay would probably take the form of a critical
26 discussion of a proposition' (Law)
- 27 • 'It has an argument, a critical argument, critique is crucial'
28 (Sociology).
- 29 • 'An essay has got to be an argument of some sort ... not simply
30 reportage or narrative' (Theatre Studies)

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

- 33 • 'We'd expect much more of a critique of their work from a third
34 year ... [student] than we would from a first year' (Computing)
- 35 • Students become 'more critical in the final stages' (Hospitality and
36 Tourism)

- 1 • First year writing should be accurate, concise, explicit, but by the
- 2 third year ‘originality should be added to the mixture’ (Psychology)
- 3 • Good students ‘develop a genuine personal voice’ (Theatre Studies)

4 Within and across departments, however, there are different views on original-
5 ity. For instance, student opinions may or may not be valued:

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

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

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

17 *Research-academic genres*

18 In contrast to the pedagogic genres of student essay and problem sheet, a
19 project report in Psychology is ‘structured like an academic article’ and must
20 adhere to the conventions of a publishable scientific paper. This view is one
21 that resonates across a number of departments: ‘Over time, student writing
22 should approximate ever more closely to the writing that academics submit for
23 publication in learned/scientific journals’ (Economics). In Psychology, practi-
24 cal reports, project reports and essays are all meant to be written in the style of
25 the classic research article, and in Food Sciences student writing is expected
26 to conform to ‘the style you’d expect in a research paper’ – ‘publishable in
27 style, but not in content’. Biology students are advised to ‘write in the style of
28 current opinion journals’. Physics tutors reported ‘trying to get [students] to
29 write a scientific paper – as might be published in a scientific journal, for an
30 audience of their peers’. However, although publication constitutes recognition
31 of success in academia, opinions varied as to the likelihood of this occurring
32 at undergraduate level. According to Psychology tutors only a minority of
33 undergraduate students reach publication standard, whereas in Biochemistry,
34 a ‘flagship’ within Biology, it was reported that ‘many year three essays are of
35 publishable quality’. Clearly although the research article is used as a model
36 in these disciplines, the purpose of writing is educational, and publication is
37 not a primary aim.

1 The typical research-academic genres identified in our interviews are sci-
 2 entific reports (which mirror research articles), and book reviews. In certain
 3 disciplines, case studies may also prove to belong in this category. Reports
 4 and case studies, however, may also be labels for assignments which emulate
 5 professional rather than academic genres.

6 *Professional genres*

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

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

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

31 **Innovative trends**

32 Evans and Abbot (1998) discuss the rise of the staff development industry and
 33 the increasing value placed on innovative practice in British higher educa-
 34 tion, particularly since the reforms of 1992. Our interviews also reflected this;
 35 some tutors were almost apologetic about their use of the ‘essay’, perceived
 36 as being ‘standard’ and ‘traditional’, and by implication unimaginative and
 37 old-fashioned:

- 1 • ‘The fact that essays are still used as the only mode by the majority
2 of English literature assessors seems to me very limiting’. (English
3 Studies)
- 4 • ‘It has been the convention to use essays. I would like to break away
5 from that’. (Psychology)
- 6 • ‘We are a traditional department and we still use mainly essays and
7 we’re very conscious that we would like to, and perhaps need to, do
8 something about that. More and more colleagues are doing different
9 things’. (Sociology)

10 Creative writing

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

21 Empathy writing

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

1 Reflective writing

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

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

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

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

24 New technologies

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

1 described above are indicative of trends, a stronger consensus emerged in
2 terms of common values.

3 **Common values**

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

7 **Learning discipline specifics**

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

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

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

1 Good writing

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

19 Conclusion

20 This study acknowledges widespread use of a set of core assignment types that
21 sit easily within the traditions of university education (essay, dissertation, book
22 review, laboratory report). Writing of this type may simply serve as evidence
23 of educational achievement, or it may reflect the output of the professional
24 academic (we distinguish between ‘pedagogic’ genres and ‘research-academic’
25 genres). In addition the study identifies a substantial number of different ‘pro-
26 fessional’ genres, reflecting the conventions and purposes of workplace texts,
27 and also the assignment of ‘empathy’ writing tasks for general readerships.
28 While pedagogic and research-academic genres tend to occur in the pure disci-
29 plines, and professional genres tend to occur within the applied disciplines,
30 it is also the case that modules in some pure disciplines require writing for
31 non-academic audiences, such as school children or museum visitors. Concern
32 with the requirements of the world of work, together with trends towards
33 increased reflective writing, seem to serve essentially formative, developmental
34 and personal or professional development goals, as captured by recent PDP
35 initiatives. We also note the use of creative writing tasks, even for students
36 outside the humanities (Law, Medicine, Sociology), and an increasing emphasis
37 on the creation and evaluation of multimodal and web-based texts.

1 The differences highlighted by Braxton (1995), Bazerman (1981) and
 2 Becher (1987) persist between those disciplines that engage in reporting facts
 3 within one paradigm, in comparison with those that require interpretation and
 4 reflection on ideas and texts within the context of competing paradigms. The
 5 danger for universities currently attempting to harmonise assessment criteria
 6 is the temptation to agree on the ‘common’ values and not interpret them
 7 sufficiently for students. Indeed one striking feature in our interviews was the
 8 sense in which tutors felt it was the subject area’s responsibility to introduce
 9 students to norms specific to their area, irrespective of norms in other areas.
 10 Some tutors did refer to faculty wide assessment criteria, but in their interpreta-
 11 tion, they were always subject- (or module-) specific. In this way our study
 12 underscores the findings of others (e.g. Neumann et al., 2002) concerning the
 13 need for students to be alert to differences not only across subject areas, but
 14 also across assignments.

15 Notes

16 1 The ESRC funded project (RES-000-23-0800) aims to compile and analyse a
 17 corpus of ‘good’ student assignments, at all levels from first-year undergradu-
 18 ate to masters degree, across the disciplines. It aims to characterise proficient
 19 student writing produced for degree programmes in British universities in terms
 20 of genres and subgenres through interviews with members of the discourse
 21 communities (here university tutors), multidimensional analysis of registers,
 22 and systemic functional genre analysis. Further details can be found at www.warwick.ac.uk/go/BAWE.
 23

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27 Appendix A: Academic interview guidance notes

- 28 • What role does assignment-writing play in your department?
- 29 • What different types of written assignment do you set your students?
30 o Could you tell us more about ZZ?
31 o Are there other types of assignment task?
32 o Do you set assignments of type [pre-existing genre] as well?
33 o Do you use other formats, e.g. videos?
- 34 • How do the assignment types you set differ?
35 o How could we tell a YY from an XX?
36 o e.g. an experimental report from a case-study?
37 o e.g. a critical review from an essay?

- 1 • What sort of differences do you expect to find between the written work of
2 first or second year students and final-year undergraduates or masters-level
3 students?
- 4 • What do you value most in student written work?
- 5 • What sorts of things do you most dislike in student's written work?
- 6 • In your opinion, how much does presentation matter?
- 7 • How do the various assignment tasks reveal evidence of the qualities you
8 value?
- 9 • Do you find that overseas students have particular problems with written
10 assignments?
 - 11 o Do you have ways and means of helping them?
- 12 • Who should we talk to about collecting assignments?
- 13 • Is there a good time to collect assignments on module MM999?
- 14 • Are there any modules we should definitely include in our sample?
 - 15 o If so, which? and why?

