A key element of the transition process for students commencing university study is adapting to new types of writing and researching (Candlin et al. 1998). In relation to academic transition, it is useful to think of two dimensions. The first is clearly a vertical transition from school to the academy (where students are likely to find that writing requirements are somewhat more demanding). The second may be characterised as a lateral transition from one discipline specialism to the next (where students find themselves having to operate in a variety of discursive modes).

In this paper, we discuss the development of a web-based writing resource aimed at helping students to negotiate these transitions. The resource seeks to characterise writing practices in a range of disciplines (economics, education, history, law, literature, marketing, management, philosophy, sociology) by drawing on samples of students’ work, as well as students’ narrated accounts of the writing and research processes they have been engaged in. Comparison will be made with Year 12 writing. This paper will also highlight a number of pedagogical issues that have had to be considered in the early stages of the project, viz: how individual students’ experiences can serve as exemplars for others; how specific writing contexts can be generalised and how writing pedagogies can be adapted to the web environment.

Introduction

One of the most challenging of the academic tasks confronting students moving into university study is the move to independent research and writing in a range of disciplines. This paper reports on the development of a web-based writing resource for first year students. Multimedia presentations are planned which will allow students to explore key elements of tertiary literacy: processes; practices; the written product and the role of participants. The paper outlines the rationale for such an approach, discusses the core design features and concludes by commenting on some critical educational issues arising from the project.

Writing: a transition issue

Transition research suggests that many students experience a range of academic adjustment difficulties when they commence their university study, many of which relate to the challenges imposed by new types of writing (Candlin, 1998). One clear difficulty for students is understanding what might be involved and expected in researching and planning assignments. In
spite of the good teaching practices of many, the tertiary culture has long had a reputation for being inexplicit about the way students should go about studying in their different disciplinary settings. For many students, this situation represents a marked contrast to their secondary school experiences, where expectations are codified comprehensively in the form of assessment criteria and sub-criteria. At the university however, these expectations are often expressed only as vague exhortations to students. The key concept of ‘critical analysis’ is a case in point. Students are told frequently that they must adopt a ‘critical’ attitude to their research (for example to their reading for an assignment or to their analysis of data they have gathered etc.), yet as Candlin (1998) points out, ‘disciplines are often unclear and inexplicit about what [this analysis] consists of’ (p.6). This point is taken up in an interesting study by Chanock (1999) that investigated lecturer and student interpretations of the term ‘analysis’ as it is used in assignment feedback to students. Chanock found that there was a significant mismatch in the understandings of the two groups, but also surprisingly that lecturers felt there was little call on them to elaborate on the concept in their teaching.

Related to this lack of understanding about expectation, is a lack of knowledge about the nature of the writing itself. Many students, especially in the preparation of their early work, express a good deal of anxiety about whether their writing is sufficiently ‘academic’. For these students, the problem often stems from a lack of access to appropriate generic models. They find themselves having to rely on, on the one hand, the ‘formative’ genres of their secondary education (over which they have gained some mastery) and on the other hand the ‘expert’ genres that make up the reading content of their course (which are clearly beyond their extant abilities). Between these two poles, it can be difficult for students to find an appropriate novitiate discursive voice, one that is right for the writing contexts they must operate in. One manifestation of this uncertainty can be a preoccupation with certain stylistic prescriptions -for example the need to avoid first person pronomials or passive voice constructions - which are likely to be of little help in students’ development of their own personal academic style. Students, when they seek assistance, often assert that if they could only see samples of well-regarded student writing in their subject, they would have a much clearer notion of how they might proceed.

The kinds of adjustment problems cited above relate to what might be called the ‘vertical transition’ - that is from school to university. There is however, another dimension to the adjustment experience - a ‘lateral’ transition that students must negotiate as they move from one discipline specialism to the next, each arguably with its own distinctive discursive mode. For students, any apprehension of cross disciplinary difference may be limited to a recognition of only superficial variants - for example that certain disciplines have preferred referencing systems. The view among many researchers however, is that these differences can be quite profound, involving for example ‘variations in knowledge structures and norms of inquiry, different vocabularies, differing standards of rhetorical intimacy’ (Bhatia, Candlin, and Hyland, 1997). There is an interesting emergent literature on how discursive differences can manifest in students’ writing. For example, in an early and well known study Clanchy and Ballard (1988) describe in detail the example of a literature-anthropology student who was able to write with authority in anthropology, but far less so in literature, ‘essentially because his anthropological concerns and perspectives appeared to intrude unwittingly into his literary studies’ (p.16). Cases
like this one suggest that in the assistance given to students, there is a need to move beyond models of a generalised register of academic writing, and to provide opportunities to explore the types of differences that inhere the various disciplines and sub-disciplines that make up undergraduate courses.

In the literature on adjustment into academic culture - in both its vertical and lateral dimensions - a common metaphor for pedagogic processes is ‘the apprenticeship’ (see for example the ‘cognitive apprenticeship’ of Lave and Wenger, 1991). In such processes, the lecturer (or disciplinary expert) is thought to provide mentoring for the ‘apprentice’ through processes of: i) modelling, to make tacit knowledge explicit; ii) coaching, by supporting students’ attempts at performing new tasks and then iii) fading after having empowered the students to work independently (Brown, Collins, Duguid, 1989). It is fair to say however, that within undergraduate education, these types of ‘apprenticing’ activities are often more desired than actual. Candlin (1998) reports for example, in his research into tertiary literacy issues at one Australian university that students do not perceive themselves to be tutored in this way; 'there is simply not the close contact with experts on real-world problems that the term apprenticeship conventionally implies' (p.21). The results of Peel’s (1998) transition research at another university are rather more pointed. In relation to instruction in writing and research matters, his student informants expressed concern inter alia about:

- a lack of provision in courses of ‘a transition stage’ in which the development of the skills of independent inquiry, research, writing and analysis might be addressed;
- a lack of available advice and assistance in assignments and learning difficulties (due mainly to increasing academic workloads, funding cuts etc.);
- too much ‘unexplained’ assessment of written work, where university teachers fail to explain what is required in a particular assignment and also do not indicate to students how their work could have been more successful. (Peel, 1998: p.6)

In undergraduate education, there is clearly a need to find ways - both new ways and ones that are supplemental to any existing good practices - that make explicit the types of writing and researching that is required of students in their courses. The Monash Transition to Tertiary Writing Project - with its aim of developing a web-based writing resource - is thought to be one way of addressing some of the problems discussed above. In the remainder of this paper we provide a broad outline of the proposed structure of the resource, along with discussion of a number of key issues that have emerged in the early stages of the project. We begin, however, with a brief discussion of a conceptual model of university writing that has informed the design phase of the resource.

A model of university writing - texts, processes and practices

Many of the developments in literacy pedagogy over the last twenty years have been founded on quite elaborate and detailed descriptions of ‘text’. Such text-based pedagogies have drawn from a range of discourse analytic methods, including for example Swales’ move theory (1990), Martin’s genre theory (1989) and Mann and Thompson’s rhetorical structure theory (1989). The broad approach of these pedagogies has been to help students recognise how various types of texts are
constructed linguistically, so that they will be able to develop - through processes of emulation - writing styles that are generically appropriate. On its own however, a text-based approach is not sufficient. Just as the discourse analysis movement itself has recognised that texts can only be properly understood in relation to the social contexts in which they are produced (see for example Halliday, 1978), so too more recent literacy pedagogies have sought to provide for students a fuller contextual account of writing. This includes an understanding of the processes by which it is constructed, as well as the social purposes and conditions that shape this construction.

In his research into literacy practices in the academy, Candlin (1998) lays out three ‘perspectives’ that need to be drawn on to gain a full understanding of the nature of writing in this domain, each suggesting its own research methodology:

- **textual structures** - involving 'linguistic descriptions' of the genres of student writing - essays reports etc.
- **discursive processes** - involving 'ethnomethodological accounts' of the ways that students go about researching and composing their work (generated from student interviews);
- **institutional practices** - involving 'ethnographic accounts' of those elements of the process that have become conventionalised and valued in the discipline (generated from a range of sources, including lecturer interviews, feedback on assignments, assignment guidelines, disciplinary style guides).

Although Candlin’s model was developed in the first instance for applied research purposes, it is our view on the *Transition to Tertiary Writing Project* that these three perspectives (and their associated methodologies) are relevant to the development of a discipline-based writing pedagogy. In Figure 1, we outline the broad cross-disciplinary model that initially informed the design of the resource; in the next section, we describe the proposed resource in some detail.
Figure 1: A model of academic writing (after Candlin, 1998)
The web-based resource

The team for the Transition to Tertiary Writing Project is a large one, consisting of the various participants implied in the Candlin methodologies above. These include: literacy specialists (from Monash’s Language and Learning Services); subject lecturers from the ten disciplines selected for inclusion on the resource (business law, economics, history, education, legal process, literature, management, marketing, philosophy, sociology); and several first year student participants from each of the discipline areas above. (Also involved are several educational technologists to assist with web design and construction.)

The web-based resource will be made up of ten modules, one for each of the first year subjects listed. The key component of each module will be a sample assignment(s) produced by student participants. The template to be used for the design of each module is set out in Figure 2, with the discipline of Philosophy used here as an example. As can be seen, the Entry Point to the module includes the essay samples along with necessary contextual material (the essay topic, any accompanying written guidelines for the essay). The module then divides into three sections, with a focus on each of the three strands from the Candlin model: i) discursive processes; ii) institutional practices; iii) textual structures.

The focus of the first section is on ‘the student’, and on the ‘processes’ involved in writing in the discipline. Here the student participants will provide information about how they went about researching and composing the sample assignments (main essay or equivalent in each subject), beginning with their first engagement with the essay topic to their submission of the final piece of work. The students will also reflect on their broad approach to university writing, and also on what comparisons can be drawn with their experiences of secondary school writing. Initially information gathering will involve diary keeping (or tape recording) in the manner of a ‘think aloud protocol’, an established research method for investigating composing processes (see Perl, 1981). This raw data will be developed into a semi-structured interview format, presented as an audio commentary on the resource. In accessing this section of the module, other students will have the opportunity to hear the voices literally of fellow students, in an interaction modelled to some extent on the practice of peer mentoring.

The second section of each module has as its focus the broad ‘institutional practices’ of writing in the discipline, using the subject lecturer as informant. Here the resource will function as a counterpoint to the previous section, with the students’ understandings of the sample task considered in relation to the lecturer’s account of their expectations of it. Similarly, the students’ impressions of their completed essay will be juxtaposed with a detailed account of the lecturer’s actual assessment, including discussion of evaluative criteria, and elaboration of comments written on the essay. As with the student commentary section, the lecturer commentary will also present observations of a general nature. These will include generalised points about writing in the discipline, along with a summary of the main types of writing difficulties experienced by
Figure 2: Template for Writing Modules
Example: Philosophy
undergraduates. It is anticipated that this will include elaboration of key concepts such as the meaning of ‘analysis’ in the particular disciplinary context.

In the third section, the focus is on the product of these processes and practices - ie. the essay samples. Where the student and lecturer sections will rely mainly on audio or transcripted commentary, this section will be organised around a range of interactive tasks, aimed at facilitating students' understanding of the nature of textual structures in their discipline. The pedagogical approach to be adopted will be based broadly on the 'student-as-discourse-analyst' model proposed by a number of tertiary literacy specialists (eg. Johns, 1997). As can be seen in the figure, the interactive tasks will take in a number of discursive features thought to be criterial to the discipline. For example, in philosophy these may include: stating a case; summarising philosophical arguments; evaluating philosophical arguments; criteria for evaluating philosophical arguments etc. It is anticipated that the final list of areas in each discipline will emerge from the processes of research initiated by the project - interviews with student and staff participants, analysis of sample essays etc.

**Issues arising from the design of the resource**

The *Transition to Tertiary Writing* project is still at an early stage, having commenced at the beginning of 2000. Much of the initial effort has gone into the designing of the proposed resource (see above). In our endeavours thus far, a number of key pedagogical issues have emerged, ones that have particular relevance to the resource itself, but which are also pertinent to the development of any university-wide program of tertiary literacy. These issues, which we can discuss only briefly here concern i) how individual students' experiences can serve as exemplars for others; ii) how specific writing contexts can be generalised and iii) how writing pedagogies can be adapted to the web environment.

The first issue involves deciding which types of texts (written by whom) should form the basis of a tertiary writing program. Until recently there has been a tendency to rely mainly on published 'expert' writing, the *sine qua non* of the 'genre approach' (see for example Swales, 1994; Weisberg and Buker, 1990). The rationale for this focus has been that expert texts are best able to demonstrate to students the conventions that govern writing in a particular field; there is also the view that discourse acquisition proceeds best through processes of text emulation (Martin and Rothery, 1993). In recent years however, there has been a shift away from this approach, mainly because it is understood that learning to write involves considerably more than conforming to certain textual norms. Furthermore, the models provided by disciplinary experts are thought to be inappropriate for students, who neither possess the same level of disciplinary authority nor write for the same communicative purposes - not to participate in the dialogue of an academic discourse community, nor to advance a particular research agenda and the like, but to write essentially for the purposes of learning and the displaying of acquired knowledge.

The alternative to relying on expert text is to use the writing of student peers as the object of instruction. This is the approach adopted on the *Transition to Tertiary Writing Project*. There is a question however, about what writing data should be drawn on here -whether for example, the
writing practices and texts of ‘exemplary’ students should be highlighted or whether a range of experiences and approaches should be represented. On the project, we believe the latter is the sounder approach, enabling for a more descriptive pedagogy, in contrast to the prescriptivism of a strict genre approach. But whilst it seems a worthwhile end in itself to provide students with access to the writing practices of others, the challenge always is to ensure that learning occurs as a result - a transforming of ‘input to uptake’, as it is characterised in the language learning literature. On the proposed resource, it will be important therefore to frame learning tasks in a way that will encourage students to reflect on their own writing practices, and to draw actively on whatever is useful from the practices ‘described’.

A second issue is the difficulty in any teaching program of providing students with a general account of academic discourse, one that students will be able to apply to a range of writing contexts. As was suggested earlier, any such account should be focussed primarily at the level of students’ specific disciplinary specialisms. There are however, further levels of refinement that need to be considered. Firstly, within disciplinary discourses, there exist arguably a range of sub-disciplinary discourses, each with their own distinctive modes of enquiry and writing. To take one example, in the various subject offerings available nowadays in the broad discipline of literature, students can be required to engage with quite disparate methods of literary analysis - 'formalist, Marxist, feminist, deconstructionist and others ... which may not be amenable to any well-intentioned generalisations about critical thinking skills' (Taylor, in press). In a similar vein, history students may need to negotiate the differences that inhere subjects that have a primarily 'historical' focus (interpretation of historical events) and those with a more 'historiographical' focus (interpretation of historical works). Further to these sub-disciplinary variations, within individual subjects, students are often required to write in a variety of generic forms - the essay; the critique, the literature review; the analytical exercise etc - each providing an additional source of variation and detail.

The proposed writing resource, by focussing on students' responses to a particular assignment task in a particular subject, has chosen to operate at this level of specificity. Whilst such an approach - the detailed analysis of particular textual instantiations - is generally thought to be the most useful for students (Johns, 1997), it can be problematic. The main concern is transferability - that is students may not recognise how they can apply task specific knowledge to other writing contexts that they must contend with. This is a problem noted by Candlin (1998) in his study of first year psychology students in their introduction to a quite specific generic form - the psychology lab report. In their subsequent assignments, Candlin found little evidence of students 'framing their writing in relation to their experience of other genres or generally from their own cultural experience. (p.16). In any writing program, it is thus important that materials are framed so that they have general applicability, and do not appear to students as mere artefacts from a quite specific learning situation. This need to strike the right balance between the general and the particular will remain a significant challenge in the development of the proposed resource.

A final issue, one that language and learning specialists increasingly face, is the challenge of adapting teaching practices to an online environment. Whilst the broad benefits of web learning
are accepted by many, there is a good deal of debate about how effective this medium can be for the teaching of complex literacy skills such as those involved in academic study (Snyder, 1996; Moore and Clerehan, in press). Pertinent to these discussions, is the distinctive nature of web hypertext interaction. Bernhardt (1993) notes for example, that in a hypertext environment, there is a tendency for users to move around sites in a relatively random and non-sequential way. Further to this, a web user is less likely to engage in ‘extended, engrossing transactions’, but is inclined, as Bernhardt suggests, to ‘glean and graze across a range of textbits’ (p.163). These features of the interaction pose particular challenges for the design of web-based writing materials. It means that materials cannot be designed simply to follow the orderly, hierarchical sequences of classroom pedagogies; rather they need to be ‘highly modularised’, as Bernhardt describes it, made up of ‘localised, non-sequential’ instructional units. The challenge is to shape materials so that they allow for this uncircumscribed and random movement through a site, but at the same time providing students with a coherent and sustained curriculum.

On the Transition to Tertiary Writing project, the principal attraction of using web-based technologies is to maximise students’ access to programs of literacy support, currently lacking in many university courses (Peel, 1998). But as we suggest above, there is a significant challenge in relying on this medium. There is also, it should be noted, a certain irony in requiring students to rely on extant computer literacy skills to receive instruction in a range of skills associated more with traditional print literacy - the implications of which we are yet to explore. The web environment nevertheless, provides considerable potential, not only for increased accessibility, but also for interesting forms of engagement created through the interactive and multimodal capabilities of the medium. Perhaps the main benefit we envisage however, is the potential for students to use the resource in very individual ways, so that in the busy round of undergraduate study, they may focus only on those aspects of disciplinary writing that seem important to them.

Conclusion

The Transition to Tertiary Writing Project is an ambitious one, both in organisational/planning terms and in the pedagogy to be used. An additional challenge is the design complexity of the proposed resource. We believe however, that there will be a number of valuable outcomes from the development process itself. These include creating a collaborative triangular relationship between students, language and learning staff, and disciplinary specialists; and also advancing knowledge of the distinctive discursive practices of a range of disciplines. But it is hoped that the final product (the resource itself) will be especially valuable, particularly to those students who find themselves grappling with the writing demands of their new courses of study. Much of our reporting of the project in this paper has been concerned with speech acts in future time (aims, intentions, expectations, predictions, and finally hopes); we look forward in a years’ time to providing a ‘reflective’ account and to report on the project’s outcomes.
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