FIRST YEAR STUDENT ESSAYS IN HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES. THE NEED FOR NEW PARADIGMS.

Howard Lukeman
Study Skills Adviser
Charles Sturt University - Riverina

This article suggests that a major factor in students' struggle with style and structure in essays in Humanities and Social Science subjects is their misunderstanding of the central assumptions and conventions held by their lecturers about essay writing. It illustrates some of the central issues lying behind this misunderstanding by analysing work done in the Learning Skills Centre at Charles Sturt University (Riverina).

This analysis supports research that suggests that students' acquisition of writing skills is entwined in their understanding of the cultural and didactic assumptions of their subjects (For example: Ballard and Clanchy, 1989; and in Taylor, et al, 1988: Cootes and Parry, 1991; Hounsell, in Richardson, et al, 1987; Peters, 1985).

Nightingale, (in Taylor, et al, 1988: 69-71) suggests that general standards of first year student literacy have not declined. Rather, academic literacy is best defined as an understanding of new and more sophisticated forms of thinking and writing. Problems with spelling, punctuation, grammar and other syntactic and grammatical categories of "deficit" are often the direct result of difficulties understanding how a particular discipline analyses and expresses its field. One study (Taylor, West and Nightingale cited in Nightingale, in Taylor, et al 1988).

> ... confirmed quantitatively the puzzling observation that student writers do not make the same mistake consistently throughout a paper. Why is a particular type of error made at some times and not at others? There is clearly some sense in which the grammatical rule is known, but it often seems to be lost in the struggle to express complex ideas.

Most of the students I advise can read and write effectively enough in their own lives, write sentences and paragraphs with reasonable coherence and know that essays have Introductions, Bodies and Conclusions. Their difficulties lie in moving toward approaching essays as exercises in exploring and creating meanings from evidence. However, in order to do this, they first need to understand the kinds of meanings that are acceptable grounds for discussion (Hounsell, in Richardson, et al 1987).

This is demonstrated in a student's Sociology essay discussing why the electronic media is a social issue. At first sight, its faults were obvious: notably the lack of a clear Introduction with a thesis and some main points to be developed in the Body, resulting in seemingly unrelated chunks of information in the Body. However, on closer analysis, there was a logical pattern to the essay. It was structured around the student's concepts of "media" and "social issue". The only problem with these was that, although they were topical social issues in the broad sense and were illustrated with interesting and cogent arguments, they did not make Sociological sense.

Therefore, while the essay was a sound statement of personal opinion supported by evidence from Sociology, it made assumptions that Sociologists do not take for granted

and were not appropriately grounded. For example, electronic media was defined by reference to the World Book Encyclopaedia. It was a social issue because "... it is commonly discussed and has a powerful affect on people's lives". The way assumptions external to the subject were presented can be seen in:

> Here we can see that it is possible for a criminal element to arise. Bashings of Teenagers have occurred to relieve victims of items of clothing because of their popular brand names. There is an obvious influence of the electronic media on this kind of behaviour.

Once we discussed the need to refocus from personal opinions to Sociological issues, she was able to define, from the evidence, an overall Sociological theme: the electronic media as a social issue because, as an agent of Socialisation, it reinforces and moulds social opinions and behaviour. She then taxonomised her evidence around the electronic media as entertainment/information disguising and promoting certain values, especially consumerism.

A major contributor to students' confusion about the purposes of essay writing is that while they are told to present arguments supported by evidence, the general perception of "argument" is very different from what really goes on in academic discourse (Compare Hounsell. in Richardson, et al 1987). This conflict is very relevant to Humanities and Social Science subjects which often deal with controversial issues, like the role of the media, that are common currency outside the fields of academic analysis and debate.

Hence, the classical type of complaint students make is that they get penalised for doing what they thought was sanctioned: arguing a strong case based on "our own ideas". They hear the message that "we can use our own ideas" about the issues they are studying and that they are supposed to present arguments.

"Arguments" are generally things we win or lose, involving strong assertions of truth aimed at proving or invalidating points. We attempt to give this analogy academic meaning by tacking on the proviso that the "argument" should be supported by evidence.

The problem is that such analogies do not really move out of the conceptual paradigm most new students have (Compare Bock 1986). Lately, I have been experimenting with approaches which are more discipline specific and, I feel, more successful.

I have started promoting a general definition of "Study Skills" as "the ability to integrate and generate discipline specific knowledge" (Bock, 1986). Underpinning this is a belief that all students have a right to clear models of analysis and written expression in the different disciplines (Webb, 1991). Thus, I have been telling students that there are definite, if often subtle and unstated, registers of written expression which not only suit but are mandatory to certain tasks and subjects (Compare Halliday and Hasan, 1985). Also, in co-operation with lecturers in some subjects, I have been presenting students with explicit models of what lecturers expect.

Central to all this is the need to create new paradigms for concepts like "argument" and "debate", concepts with specialised meanings - across and within disciplines - and involving specialised processes of thinking. Form the perspective of lecturers who may be tired of hours attempting to respond adequately to poor work, some initial time spent teaching paradigms can pay off by giving students precise ideas about what undergraduate essays really are.

One paradigm I am currently using comes from Martin and Peters (1985; also see Peters, 1985), who identify three approaches to essay topics: argumentive, interpretive and evaluative. They are not necessarily prescriptive to "types" of questions and a combination of them would be necessary in most essays. However, most successful essays do demonstrate a "dominant" approach which still answers the question in a way that is relevant to subject and topic (Peters 1985: 41).

Argumentive approaches are those that support a proposition with a logically organised set of reasons (Peters, 1985: 51) "So what", we may say, "isn't that what we tell students to do?" However, as Martin and Peters point out, a close analysis of supposedly argumentive student texts shows that they are often really interpretive and evaluative (1985: 87).

Interpretive writing highlights a theme or discusses trends or patterns (Peters, 1985: 41). For example, the following English literature topic seems to invite an argument which would support or reject the proposition with degrees of qualification: "The aim of Gulliver's Travels is to humiliate rather than help Humanity. Discuss". But organising evidence and writing in a ways that qualifies a case is precisely where first year students have trouble. After I discussed the novel and the question with the student, he developed an approach which discussed various aspects of the text which supported the theme of Swift's novel as an attempt, through satire, to "shock" Humanity into taking a good look at its cherished view of itself. Be defusing the desire to "attack" the proposition (reflecting our general cultural conception of "argument") he worked up an essay that, for all its faults, got some major commendations.

Peters (1985) defines evaluative writing as aiming to justify a judgement by presenting criteria and applying them to selected evidence. The criteria are principles (or standards of judgement stemming from the principles) established within the discipline (Bock, 1986). As noted above with the essay on media, this is exactly where students often "come unstuck", generally in two ways.

Firstly, despite having all the relevant "facts", essays still come back with comments that they have not answered the questions. Often the thesis is either non-existent or a set of summarised points that are not relevant to the topic or seem irrelevant to the discussion and conclusion of the essay. An underlying reason for these irrelevant platitudes seems to be a lack of understanding of the criteria the question really wants tested: as in the question on the electronic media as a social issue. In an essay discussing how women are disadvantaged in the workforce, one student covered relevant issues and gave some good examples. Nevertheless, the lecturer's comment that there was "no overall argument" and too much summarised but not analysed information mirrored the student's misunderstanding. The real task was to state some Sociological principles about gender, "group" the evidence and discuss it in relation to the principles in order to establish their validity.

The second evaluative "danger zone" is wanting to argue with the principles on which the question is predicated or moving personal concerns into central focus and attempting "moral", as opposed to "analytical", persuasion (Martin 1985) based on principles outside the discipline. An example of this is a student who failed an essay because she "couldn't stand" the radical feminist literature she had to read for the topic and ended up writing a tirade. The essay was a "logical argument" with good grammar, syntax and spelling. But while the radical feminist fortress was stormed, the question remained unanswered.

This illustrates how careful we need to be in telling students that University encourages them to "argue" and "use your own ideas". It is here that students can benefit from discussions and models which examine the real nature of analytical thinking and writing in their subjects. Certainly, in my attempts to interpret the academic "cultures" (Ballard and Clanchy, 1988; Cootes and Parry, 1991) to students I find I am constantly defining and redefining the limit to what students see as permissible and helping them create new paradigms of "arguments", "discussions" and "own ideas".

This article's central point is that first year students' essay writing issues are more fundamentally linked to their need for paradigms of thinking and writing that convey new purposes than to any general "literacy" deficits. Once academic literacy is viewed from this perspective, existing competencies in other forms of literacy are not always relevant to poor student writing. Instead, the focus shifts to structures and premises of critical analysis and persuasive writing that are central to the content being taught and learned. Thus, what becomes important is not so much the role of study skills advisers as the extent to which academics see themselves as a part of this process.

Bibliography

Ballard, B. and Clanchy, J. (1988) Literacy in the university: an anthropological approach in Taylor, G., Ballard, B., Beasley, V., Bock, H., Clanchy, J. and Nightingale, P. Literacy by Degrees. Open University Press: Stony Stratford.

Ballard, B. and Clanchy, J. (1989) The Cultures of Reason: students in strange lands. Paper delivered to the Flinders Conference on Reasoning.

Bock, H. (1986) Phenomonography: orthodoxy and innovation or innovation and orthodoxy? in Bowden, J. Student Learning: Research into Practice. University of Melbourne: Parkville.

Cootes, S. and Parry, S. (1991) Academic Skills: the Problem of Acquiring the Genre of Each Discipline. Paper delivered to the ANZSSA Conference, Sydney.

Halliday, M. and Hasan, R. (1985) Language, Context and Text: Aspects of Language in a Social Semiotic Perspective. Deakin University Press: Geelong.

Hounsell, D. (1987) Essay writing and the quality of feedback in Richardson, J.T., Eysenck, M.W. and Piper, D.W. Student Learning: Research in Education and Cognitive Psychology. SRHE, Open University Press: Milton Keynes.

Martin, J.R. (1985) Factual Writing: Exploring and Challenging Social Reality. Deakin University Press.

Martin, J.R. and Peters, P. (1985) On the analysis of exposition in Hasan, R. (ed.) Discourse on Discourse. Applied Linguistics Association of Australia, Occasional Papers, 7.

Nightingale, P. (1988) Language and learning: a bibliographical essay in Taylor et al.

Peters, P. (1985) Strategies for Student Writers. John Wiley and Sons: Milton.

Webb, C. (1991) Writing an Essay in the Humanities and Social Sciences. Learning Assistance Centre: University of Sydney.