

Academic Writing Development in the LLC Program

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Abstract

When considering the ways in which undergraduate students develop as they pursue their degree, there are many ways in which this can be seen. We might consider the development involved with expanding knowledge within their chosen field, developing their confidence when giving oral presentations and perhaps even developing better study habits. However, academic writing is arguably one of the most important areas in which students need to develop their ability. Gimenez (2008:151) declares that ‘academic writing has long been recognised as an essential skill university students need to master’. Considering that the academic essay is predominately used as the main tool of assessment in universities, writing development is suggested to be a necessary area for further research. For this purpose, the academic writing of an undergraduate student, John, at The University of Manchester in the United Kingdom was analysed over a three-year period¹, based on analysis of his essays from each academic year. His writing development is centred on how well he attended to lecturer feedback with regard to initial writing weaknesses, in addition to the final scores for his essays; the subsequent analysis of his written work arguably reveals little overall development, however, from the first year when he began his degree to the final year, which culminated in the writing of a 12,000 word dissertation.

Keywords: Academic writing; writing development; essay feedback.

1. Introduction

Spack (1997:3) states that ‘*despite the ever-increasing number* of undergraduates entering the academy who are said to be unprepared for its demands, we have relatively little substantive knowledge of the processes through which students acquire the academic discourses

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¹ In the United Kingdom, a BA degree is generally a three year course.

necessary to achieve success' (original emphasis). This is arguably a strong justification for conducting longitudinal studies of students' writing, as many analyses of students' academic writing (Hinkel, 1997; Hyland, 1998; Charles, 2003, 2005; Hyland and Tse, 2005) are focused on a given moment in time, without any indication of the process through which students acquired their writing skills. Likewise, if analysing the initial writing weaknesses of students, it might be interesting to see how, if at all, their later writing develops.

Previous studies within the field of writing development tend to focus on specific features, such as development of a higher lexical density in the writing of children and adults (Hunt 1970); development of cohesive devices such as *that*-complements within the writing of first grade students (Fang 1997); development of a child's use of grammatical metaphor, from childhood to adolescence (Derewianka, 1995); the development of packing information into clausal structures, which often involves the use of nominalizations, seen in the writing of non-native English speakers (Ventola, 1996); and the development of nominalization use throughout an undergraduate degree course (Baratta, 2009b). While such studies are valuable, the focus on specific features within writing arguably means that a more holistic developmental focus is missing; the focus on specific features, then, means that we do not get an accurate idea of 'the big picture' regarding writing development. Therefore, what might be considered *overall development* within academic writing?

There are notable exceptions, however, regarding more holistic approaches to writing development. Katznelson, Perpignan and Rubin (2001) focus on the academic writing development of ESL students in graduate and postgraduate school over the course of a year, citing examples of improved organization of their ideas and the maintenance of a consistent focus throughout their essays. A study by de Haan and van Esch (2005) focuses on writing development in English and Spanish as foreign languages. A further study by Scheuer, de la Cruz, Pozo, Huarte and Sola (2006) broadly proposes specific developmental features in the writing of children from years four to ten, such as learning how to use letters to the culmination by year ten of producing a coherent piece of writing which is thematically articulated.

The current study adopts a twofold approach: first, to determine what John's main writing weaknesses are within his first year essays based on the feedback he received from his lecturers and if indeed these deficiencies are subsequently attended to in years two and three. The final scores for his essays are also presented, as well as the annual averages of essay scores.

2. Literature Review

Despite many studies of academic writing which focus on writing at a given moment, or writing development from the perspective of an individual linguistic feature, there are many studies which have focused on academic writing development from the aforementioned holistic perspective, the majority of which are US-based. They include the four-year rhetorical development within a biology student's essays (Haas, 1994); a focus on how students' lives outside the classroom affect their development in writing and education overall (Sternglass, 1997); writing development seen within the areas of idea elaboration, fluency and vocabulary (Haswell, 2000); and development of academic writing ability from several interactive perspectives, such as discipline-specific knowledge, subject matter knowledge and writing-process knowledge, for example, seen within the writing of an undergraduate history student over a three-year period (Beaufort, 2004).

A longitudinal study by Spack (1997) has been selected for a more in-depth discussion, as it exploits a gap in that it focuses on a case study involving a foreign student, Yuko from Japan, studying political science. This is a necessary study, as Beaufort's case-study on a 'mainstream' student (i.e. white and middle-class) is not necessarily applicable to students from other backgrounds (based on race, class or here, a foreign culture), a point which Beaufort acknowledges. Spack's study traces the three-year writing development of Yuko, albeit relying on only a few of her essays within the time frame. As Spack focuses on a non-native English speaker, there are issues involved which are irrelevant to the current study, such as cultural adjustment, though the broad issue of writing development is wholly relevant of course, and the fact that the development is traced across a three year period also mirrors the time frame seen in this study.

Spack reports a comment from Yuko which reveals something of the new culture, both geographical (the USA) in addition to the culture of higher education in the USA. Regarding the style of essay writing in the USA, for example, Yuko states that "here, it's more logical. Topic/explanation. We don't have that style at all – we just go on and on and write" (page 15). By year two, semester one, Yuko reported that she had "learned a lot, especially how to write papers" (page 22), and by this time, she had achieved a grade A on an essay. By year three, Spack reports that Yuko had come to a 'genuine understanding' (page 44) regarding her academic writing, thus further evidence of her development in this field.

Sommers and Saltz (2004) analyse the writing development of freshmen students, arguing that those who develop most within their writing are, in part, those who see writing as more than just a means to a final score in a class. This was an extensive study, involving various

academic majors and 422 students in total, with a key finding (one which the researchers were unprepared for) being that both weak and strong writers alike generally agreed that regardless of their struggles with writing, they all agreed on the importance of essay writing. They commented that this was due to the essay allowing them to explore new ideas, apply these ideas to the course and to become involved with the course. This ties in with a comment made by Sternglass (1997): 'As students are able to translate textbook and lecture jargon into their own language, they develop the ability to use writing as a means to critique existing materials and to develop their own insights' (page xiv). In addition, becoming more involved with the course reflects a development within students' *attitudes* toward writing, revealing a mindset that might be termed 'academic belonging'. This was succinctly put by one student within the study, who declared that she no longer felt like an 'academic tourist' (page 130). This suggests that a growing confidence in one's writing ability may be linked to more than just better understanding of the writing process, but actually begins with a developing sense of an academic self – seeing oneself as part of the overall academic discourse community (see Swales, 1990).

Fishman, Lunsford, McGregor and Otuteye (2005) present a five-year longitudinal study (the Stanford Study of Writing) which focuses on the various writing assignments that college students are involved with. This study focuses specifically on 'writing performances', which refers to the ways in which students bring their performance interests outside the classroom – public speaking, radio broadcasts and press releases – and write about them. This relates to established writing practices in schools, such as reflective writing, that which 'focuses upon the writer's thoughts and feelings concerning his or her experiences' (Emig, 1971:4). This can be seen in writing exercises such as journals, freewriting and the personal essay. By allowing the student to write from such a personal perspective such exercises have 'helped to legitimate voices silenced in the traditional English classroom, voices of women, ethnic minorities, and other oppressed groups' (Bizzell, 2000: 114). Therefore, while Fishman et al (2005:231) state that 'courage and college do not always mix', within the context of the participants' involvement in writing that reflects what they do *outside* school, courage is a relevant factor. This is based on the idea that such reflective writing can lead to 'positive feelings about oneself and one's writing, motivation to revise and improve composition skills' (Gere, 1994:78).

Moreover, one participant stated that 'insights also come out of active experience', which suggests that performative writing (and reflective writing as a whole) is more than just a gimmick; it provides students the chance to write from personal perspectives and interests, in

effect allowing them to be in an authoritative position and the experience may even be cathartic for some. Therefore, this study suggests ways to facilitate students' development in writing by means of the pedagogic practices within the classroom.

Based on the results of the studies presented thus far, it can be seen that students' attitude toward writing plays a large part within their subsequent development. While obvious, this finding suggests that a desire to be part of one's discourse community and enjoy the journey of being a student (as well as the writing assignments) is perhaps more relevant to overall development than 'natural ability' (seen in the fact that initially weak writers also expressed positive feelings when looking back on their freshman-level essays in the study of Sommers and Saltz). Furthermore, a journey is a fitting metaphor, as it takes into account the fact that development goes beyond a single composition class, let alone an entire school year, and is witnessed beyond the concrete activity of writing, but is also seen within more abstract qualities such as one's attitude toward the writing assignments, if not university life in general.

However, the fact that the majority of longitudinal studies on academic writing derive from the USA suggests that similar studies from other parts of the world are comparatively lacking. Arguably, the fact that the USA has a nationally-prescribed writing class might help to explain the reason for the focus on US academic writing within the literature. In other words, as composition is a subject deemed important enough to be mandatory (without a passing score in Freshman Composition, for example, undergraduate students cannot progress to the junior year of their degree), it perhaps dictates the need to have extensive studies within this area.

While the United Kingdom does not have a mandatory writing class, it is arguably the case that writing centers and writing classes are appearing with more frequency within the university curriculum in the UK (though many writing classes are often provided only for non-native English speakers, which is ironic given that many native speakers of English are not always well-placed to write academic essays). Moreover, Ivanic (1998:75) states that the Freshman Composition class is becoming the basis for the theory and research of academic writing lecturers in the United Kingdom. Therefore, this article seeks to contribute to research in a subject area which is comparatively lacking: longitudinal studies of academic writing within the UK.

While the current study cannot compete with previous studies in terms of scope, such as Sternglass (1997) and Sommers and Saltz (2004), it does present the writing development of one student in great detail, by offering detailed discussion of his essays from all three years,

to include lecturer feedback, in addition to drawing on the author's knowledge of the writing conventions of the student's academic program and including the results of interviews with three staff members. This can contribute to a fuller understanding of writing development by discovering how much, if at all, staff members' thoughts in terms of writing development correlate with those of an undergraduate student. Before presenting the methodology adopted within the current study, two notable British studies of academic writing development are presented.

Hoadley-Maidment (1997) analyzes the academic writing development of eleven students who were involved with distance learning in the British Open University over a six-month period. Lecturer feedback provided for their essays tended to focus on broad issues related to structure and the need for more analysis. Based on a juxtaposition of questionnaire feedback from the students and lecturer feedback provided on the essays, it can be seen that broader concerns were indeed the main focus for students and lecturers alike:

1. For some students, there was still a reported weakness in writing conclusions at the end of the six month period. One relevant lecturer comment reads "your conclusion doesn't really do justice to the arguments that have gone before" (page 62).
2. Both students and lecturers reported difficulties in analysing the subject within the essays and merely describing instead. A lecturer commented thus: "move from describing to analysis" (page 62), with a student stating that "(I'm) trying to be argumentative, analytical, using the new 'language'" (ibid).
3. Development was seen, however, regarding students' introductory paragraphs in that by the end of the study, 'most students were reasonably happy about introductions' (page 62). No further information is given, but this finding nonetheless suggests that development, seen through fairly positive student feedback, was a reality in at least this specific area.

The study of Hoadley-Maidment is useful, as though it reports on writing development within a relatively short period of time, writing development is nonetheless seen, certainly regarding the construction of introductions. Furthermore, development is seen regarding students' *understanding* of academic writing conventions, demonstrated with students reporting a growing awareness of the need to analyse, not just describe or narrate, in addition to the need for inclusion of technical lexis in their essays. Woodward-Kron (2004:234) states, for example, that it is important to develop students' academic vocabulary 'for

successful writing and learning at university'. It is acknowledged, however, that students' awareness of what is needed for proficient writing does not automatically translate into proficient academic writing output; this requires time.

Finally, a study by Ivanic (1998) focuses on the development of an academic identity, one which is partly acquired by becoming more familiar with the discipline-specific writing skills expected in one's community and ultimately, based on the ways in which writers signal authorship within their essays. This links with the studies of Sommers and Saltz (2004) and Beaufort (2004), in which students' development of an 'academic mindset' can be as problematic as their writing, seen with Tim in the case study of Beaufort, whose initial purpose for writing was for the grade, 'rather than connecting to a larger community of historians' (page 173).

Development of an academic identity also relates to writer stance (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, and Finegan, 1999; Hunston and Thompson, 2000; Hyland, 2002; Hyland and Tse, 2004; Baratta, 2009a), which refers to the ways in which students position themselves within their texts, such as offering an opinion or an evaluation, and in doing so, reveal their beliefs. Ivanic refers to this academic identity as *self-hood*, which involves finding one's personal voice within the context of simultaneously producing quality academic texts.

Within the case study that Ivanic conducted, students reported to Ivanic an initial conflict between their individual selves and their 'becoming' selves as they developed an academic identity, in part based on their uncertainty regarding how much self-revelation was permitted. An example Ivanic offers concerns a black British woman who refrained from using first person plural to describe the experiences of black women in Western society, choosing to use 'they' instead, as she believed it to be more appropriate for her discipline of sociology, even though it was not 'appropriate' for her as an individual with the identity of a black woman. In this sense, the academic self determined that the personal self (known as *the autobiographical self*) was inappropriate for the conventions of academic writing.

The transition from an individual self to an academic self, which Fairclough (1995: 227) describes as 'an uncomfortable and alienating experience', ideally culminates in the adoption of an academic identity. Woodward-Kron (2004) regards newcomers to the discipline (e.g. first year undergraduates) as 'apprentices' (page 141), further describing the development of their status within the community thus: 'students *gradually* shift from peripheral participation to become fully-fledged members of the discourse community' (ibid, my emphasis). Ivanic (1998) concurs, summarizing the development of an academic identity from the point of view that 'students begin as novices' and change their status *over time* 'from newcomers to

members' (page 118).

It is strongly suggested that a major factor in separating apprentices from members of a discourse community is based on the quality of the academic texts that they produce and Woodward-Kron (2004) discusses the importance of marker feedback, for example, as a means to 'influence students' induction into a discipline's discursive practices' (page 142). Academic writers are not born; they develop throughout the duration of their academic coursework and beyond. Therefore, we might expect to find an accompanying development as students progress throughout their written work over the course of a BA program. With regard to writing evolution and development, Schleppegrell (2001:455) states that 'developing new registers, like learning a foreign language, requires experience, practice, motivation...to negotiate meaning'. Therefore, within the framework of an exploratory investigation, this study seeks to answer the following questions, in an attempt to reveal information regarding the ways in which a student learns to produce proficient academic texts and in doing so, become a member of his academic community:

1. Based on lecturer feedback, what are the student's initial writing weaknesses?
2. Are such weaknesses overcome in later essays?

It is acknowledged that analysing the writing of just one individual student means that there is less room for the results to be applied to students in general. However, the following information is provided as a means to better place the results of this study within a wider framework nonetheless, suggesting that there is perhaps a bit more scope with which to make certain generalizations about academic writing development.

1. First, the results of this study will be analysed in light of previous studies on academic writing development, such as Hoadley-Maidment (1997), in order to determine how much, if at all, the results suggest common weaknesses in students' early writing.
2. This study essentially follows on from a similar study, part of the author's PhD thesis, which analysed the writing development of six undergraduate students within the same academic program as John. The program is entitled Language, Literacy and Communication (LLC), within the School of Education at The University of Manchester in the UK. While the previous study only analysed a sample of essays for each student (three essays from years one and two and the final-year dissertation), the results of a student's writing development within the current study will also be

considered in light of previous work carried out within the same academic program.

3. The analysis of John's academic writing is informed by the author's suggested 'insider' status within the LLC program. This includes having taught a variety of courses in the program since 2003, in addition to first and second marking essays from several courses throughout all three years; establishing a new writing course and writing center; and currently serving as program director.

Points two and three above have arguably helped the author to be more aware of what the more common weaknesses are with regard to students' early writing, certainly within the LLC program and arguably common to undergraduate students in general. This is not to suggest that the analysis of John's essays has been based on preconceived notions regarding what his initial writing deficiencies 'should' or 'should not' have been; rather, the discussion and interpretation of his writing is seen from a broader perspective, as well as an individual one, based on being able to see individual writing development in terms of how, if at all, it might also share similarities with the writing development of other students. Therefore, the analysis of the writing development of one student does not necessarily take place within a vacuum, and can therefore be related to previous studies of academic writing and personal experience of the students' writing overall within the LLC program.

The LLC program focuses largely on linguistics, from a varied perspective. For example, the 'Language' strand of the program deals with sociolinguistics, syntax and pragmatics. 'Literacy' focuses on more than just the ability to read and write, but also on varied literacies associated with other contexts, such as visual literacy. Finally, Communication ties the previous two strands together, analysing the ways, for example, in which accent is used in commercials to affect audience perception of the product, with students also analysing literacy from a filmic perspective in the final-year film course, discussing ways in which directors create meaning in films, using camera angles and various editing techniques. A great deal of emphasis is placed on personal expression in LLC writing, resulting in a prominent use of first person pronouns, for example, within students' essays. As one lecturer who was interviewed for this study commented, "The LLC course offers more scope for students to use their personal experience in writing, but to do this well they have to be able to integrate this reflection with appropriate criticality which is hard to do.... the use of personal experience and reflection is praised by external examiners". While this information relates to discipline-specific writing, which is not a focus of this study per se, it needs to be pointed out that development within a student's academic writing will undoubtedly be informed by the

specific requirements within his/her discipline in terms of what is determined to be proficient writing.

3. Methodology

For the purposes of conducting research on academic writing development, the entire essay output of an undergraduate student was chosen for analysis. Final year BA students had been approached in class in order to ask for their assistance, specifying the author's need to analyse their essays as part of a research project. Having explained the project and assured potential volunteers of anonymity, the author was then contacted by John, who agreed to allow access to his essays for analytical purposes. The essays were all collected from storage and following this, John was interviewed in order to gather his thoughts on how he believed his writing had developed. The interview took place in the spring semester of his final school year, thereby requiring John to reflect on his writing on a somewhat retrospective basis. It could be argued that to better understand writing development, it might be wise to interview a student on this subject throughout each year of his/her degree program. However, this decision was not taken for the following reasons.

First, there was the issue of time to consider. When the availability arose for the author to conduct this study, the writing of a third-year student was chosen for analysis, knowing that this would allow access to the entire essay output at one time and moreover, would save time by not having to start the study with a current year one student. This would have resulted in the study being conducted for a further two years and given that it is small-scale in nature, this decision seemed unnecessary. Second, discussing writing development with a final-year undergraduate was also felt to arguably allow for more informed discussion from John, in that, having reached the end of his degree program, he might be better positioned to comment on what academic writing development means – in this case, from a final year perspective, when ideally, we would hope that development has taken place. To complement the analysis, three LLC lecturers were also interviewed in order to gain their perspectives on development in regard to writing, as mentioned previously.

The results of the interviews with John and the staff are interspersed within the actual discussion of John's writing. For each year, extracts from several essays with corresponding lecturer feedback are provided. In addition, the essay scores for each year are presented, along with the average score for that particular year. There are different numbers of essays for each year based on the fact that certain courses assess students by an exam, not an essay (in which case, the assessment for such units was not relevant to this study).

A final point to make concerns the nature of the written feedback offered to students, which is provided in two ways. First, lecturers provide written feedback on the essays themselves, in which specific strengths or weaknesses are pointed out, mostly with comments written in the margin. A more systematic form of feedback consists of that offered on an actual feedback sheet, which is attached to the front of students' essays. On the front of the feedback sheet, lecturers usually give a paragraph of overall feedback, based on the essay's more prominent areas of strength and weakness. On the reverse side of the feedback form, however, is an actual breakdown of the five main areas in which the students' essays are assessed, as seen below in Table I:

Table 1.
Feedback Criteria²

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS							
Argument & Structure	1	2i	2ii	3	C	F	n/a
					F		
Knowledge & Understanding	1	2i	2ii	3	C	F	n/a
					F		
Use of Sources	1	2i	2ii	3	C	F	n/a
					F		

² Within the University's marking scheme, a score of 70 or above is considered 'first class', and signifies that the student's writing is exceptional, clearly focused, original and demonstrates a firm grasp of grammar and style. A second class score, ranging from 60 – 69, indicates an overall assessment of 'very good' and is thus comparable to a grade of B. Scores in the band of 50 – 59 are comparable to a grade of C, 'average', and 40 – 49, while a passing score band, is considered a minimal pass nonetheless. From the average scores, then, it can be seen that the students have indeed shown improvement, by moving from one score band to the next higher.

Analysis & (where relevant) Application	1	2i	2ii	3	C	F	n/a
Presentation & Language	1	2i	2ii	3	C	F	n/a
Achievement of Outcomes/Overall	1	2i	2ii	3	C	F	

The information outlined within the various scoring bands is self-explanatory, but some terms are perhaps in need of further clarification. ‘Argument’ refers to the writer’s thesis, the term used in the Freshman Composition class, with structure corresponding to coherence – the ways in which the writer divides his/her essay topics in a logical sequence. A student’s use of sources is judged on how accurate the formatting is, as well as how well the sources serve to support and illustrate the argument being made. Points tend to be lost in this area if the student’s use of sources simply mirrors lecture notes. Finally, presentation and language refers to a student’s use of Standard English syntax, in addition to an overall appropriate academic style and correct formatting for the essay (e.g. the use of 12 size Times New Roman font) and a complete references section. Therefore, the final score awarded to an essay is based on the individual scores given to the student’s overall competence in the five areas of feedback presented in Table One.

4. Analysis

In the interview, John had defined the word development as “to improve” and “to see a

noticeable improvement”. He further applied this definition to “not just essay writing, but analytical skills as a whole”. One lecturer interviewed defined development thus: “the aim is to create better thinkers, better writers, and better researchers”, with another lecturer stating that students should “be able to make improvements in analysis and gain confidence as a writer which also determines their capacity as a writer”. The fact that John and staff members refer to improved analytical skills as being tied to development is significant, as it demonstrates how important this skill is. Whether John is referencing analytical skills based on comments made as part of his essay feedback or simply based on what he personally feels is indicative of academic development, his views are reflective of what staff also consider to be an important factor in development overall. Moreover, for students’ essays it is usually, if not always the case that ‘analysis’ is the one area that receives the highest weighting in terms of a student’s final score (presuming of course that the student’s knowledge is sound). The implication of this is that weaknesses in terms of presentation and formatting, and perhaps even structure, might not lead to a particularly low score if indeed the analysis is strong. As one lecturer pointed out, “Content is more important than style”.

Based on the definition that John gave regarding writing development, when asked if he believed that he had improved since he began his course in September 2006, his response was “yes, definitely”...“I can see a noticeable improvement”. These responses were complemented by John declaring that he had a “deeper understanding” and there had been a “massive improvement since A-level”³ Analysis and discussion now begins, looking at the writing of John year by year, to see if his opinions on his writing development are indeed reflected in the analysis of his work.

4.1 Year One

For his essay from a course entitled Aspects of Literacy, John did not receive a passing score. The feedback instructed John to “do more reading” for his assignments and to plan what he was going to write. A further comment included “not enough awareness of theory is evidenced”. The two comments combine to suggest an overall lack of support, in part based on not having shown enough evidence of background reading.

This ties in with a comment made by one of the staff members interviewed, who said that a weakness for students was “not doing wide enough reading to support the statements they are making. Sometimes in assignments students write a whole page without any academic

³ In the UK, advanced (A) levels are qualifications which are taken between the ages of 16 – 18, the results of which determine students’ eligibility for university. Generally, students study three A-levels for the two year duration.

support included”. Another lecturer supported this statement, saying that “weaknesses often arise from a lack of background reading which is in turn shown in lack of referencing within assignments”.

Moreover, the fact that John mentioned in the interview that he had developed his analytical skills throughout his degree course is interesting, as excerpts from his first-year Literacy essay below reveal a lack of analysis – thus suggesting that John is aware that he had deficiencies in this area.

The Literacy essay discusses John’s various literacy practices and events, in conjunction with the research of Barton (1994):

‘...text messaging has become so prevalent that I would deem it as an everyday literacy...it has become fully integrated and accepted by most societal groups’.

‘...newspapers are read in all cultures and all societies’

The comment from the lecturer for both statements above was succinctly written in the margin: *evidence?* The previous comments made by staff regarding the need for extensive reading seem particularly relevant to the work of John within this essay, as his excerpts are quite assertive but no support is offered.

Providing support for one’s assertions or claims is clearly a necessary component of good academic writing. The fact that John has not provided support suggests a lack of analysis in that there is no indication that he has first sufficiently considered his assertions – for example, not all societies, especially without a written form of language, could of course use newspapers. John also admitted to me in the interview that he did have a problem, even in the final year, with a lack of hedging for his claims. The statement that text messaging ‘has become fully integrated and accepted by most societal groups’ is an example of a need for hedging at least (e.g. *possibly become fully integrated*), if not providing support. The comment from the lecturer on this point is “don’t over-generalise”, to include “be careful about making value judgements”. A comment offered within the interview with LLC staff ties in with the need for offering support, as a lecturer said that students “need to evidence that they have read research material and use this to support their argument.”

Thus far, the comments made by staff within the interviews are hardly controversial, yet to a first-year undergraduate student it can be a daunting task to get to grips with the finer points of academic writing – in this case, the need for adequate background reading and provision of

support.

Furthermore, John does not define, or give an example of, ‘societal groups’, which is a somewhat vague expression. This omission is arguably an example of lack of analysis, in that John is again using broad claims without first having given more careful thought to clarifying for his lecturer exactly what/who he is referring to. In fact, lecturer feedback states “not to use really bold terms such as ‘this proves...’”. More specifically, the following comment is placed under the feedback category of knowledge and understanding: “your account of a literacy practice wasn’t quite right – it’s not just about cultural knowledge”.

Finally, another area of weakness mentioned under the category of argument and structure points to a lack of a discernible thesis; “your argument was introduced quite late”. John’s introduction paragraph, clearly the place for his thesis to be stated, instead offers a great deal of background information, which lasts for more than one page. It is then that his argument is finally introduced, in the second paragraph, which is the fact that he agrees with the social view of literacy put forward by Barton and Hamilton. A lecturer said during an interview that “students often leave their argument to the end of the assignment, rather than stating their argument upfront, or those arguments are not presently explicitly enough”. In the absence of a nationally prescribed writing class in the UK (e.g. akin to the US Freshman Composition class), British students have perhaps less idea as to how to construct an essay, to include the importance of offering their thesis (or ‘argument’) from the beginning of their essay.

For his Introduction to Grammar essay (on the subject of passive verbs), John receives a score of 40, a minimal pass. Again, comments refer to lack of reading on the subject (“student does not show background reading, he is basing his arguments on personal opinion/impression”) and a lack of analysis (“weak analysis”). However, comments also include “misunderstanding of key factors” and “no bibliography”. Together, these issues contribute to the low score. Below is an excerpt from John’s Grammar essay, demonstrating some of these deficiencies:

‘...if the author has no clear idea of exactly who will be reading the text,
then they cannot use active verbs because they need it to be applicable to all’

The excerpt above received the comment of “not accurate” from the lecturer. Presumably, John’s point was that passive verbs help to create a more ‘neutral’ tone, in part by removing a human agent perhaps. However, his statement above is rather absolute and furthermore, not well defined. A further statement by John within this essay was that he was surprised “as to

how little (passives) were even used at all” within the text sample he chose from a newspaper. This statement also represents a lack of critical thinking, based on John not having first considered the context. As the lecturer claims, “depends on what “literature” you read, eg fiction, academic prose”.

A final comment by John in the essay reveals what is perhaps the main area of weakness, albeit one connected with a lack of analysis. He writes that “active verbs directly address their audience...the text is given a sense of personal belonging when subjects are clearly used within each clause because the reader feels as if the article has been written for them”. This statement reveals several issues with John’s early writing.

First, it reveals an overall inaccuracy, perhaps based on simply misunderstanding the class material. In this case, John’s assertion that active verbs directly address their audience would presumably only be true if the verb is used in conjunction with the second person, part of what is referred to as reader engagement (see Hyland 2005). It appears that John is assuming that the placing of a human subject within an active clause contributes in toto to a sense that the text is written ‘directly’ for the reader. This is of course not true and not all active verbs involve a human agent in the first instance (and some passive sentences do have a human agent of course). In addition, an earlier comment that passive voice does not contain a subject is also an example of misunderstanding the role of passive voice (which does contain a subject based on the rules of syntax, as the lecturer explains in the essay’s margin). Second, John has a tendency, seen in the examples above, to make broad, ‘absolute’ statements. On one level, such assertions may involve a degree of truth (e.g. the previous claim made about text messaging), but can sometimes involve complete inaccuracy, as is the case with the analysis of passive verbs. In both cases, such assertions demonstrate little evidence of having given sufficient thought to the subject beforehand and again, indicate a need for more support and/or the need to hedge and broadly, to think more critically about the subject.

Related to John’s early weaknesses regarding a lack of analysis, the feedback for his Grammar essay states that John “does not show background reading, (he) is basing arguments on personal opinion/impression”. This relates to the feedback for his Literacy essay, which also states that there is “far too little evidence of reading”. John said during interview that an early writing weakness was that he did not engage with the essay question; based on the feedback he had received over the years, he said that he had now learned “how to engage with the question”, however. He further said that the feedback he received over the three years of his course, both written and oral, was responsible for the aforementioned ‘question engagement’, which could involve, partly at least, the need to fully answer the question based

on the specific type of essay (e.g. an argument versus an expository essay) and, once again, to analyse the subject. A fuller discussion was provided in interview with a staff member, who said that “it is important for students to take a position on what others have argued and be able to unpack the assumptions, omissions and bias in other's work”. This explains what essay engagement can involve, but which tends to be missing from John’s work.

Again, in the absence of a writing class, students are arguably less well positioned to understand the finer points of academic writing. In fact, the same lecturer had said that “students initially find it difficult to know what the more implicit requirements or ‘rules of the game’ are”. It is telling that the word *implicit* is used. While lecturers have an innate understanding of what is required regarding academic writing, first-year undergraduate students generally do not. Though a focus for a separate paper, it is argued that the rules of the game need to be made clear to first-year undergraduates. While this does not of course prevent future difficulties for a student’s essay writing, it can help to minimize the confusion for students who enter university without a real understanding of what is expected of them in their essays; a writing class could make the conventions of academic writing *explicit*.

Taking a look at another year-one essay, Aspects of Communication, we can see how John’s early writing lacked such critical analysis of, and engagement with, the essay question, instead relying more on description. The Communication essay’s purpose is to discuss an exercise in which students worked in groups to construct an interview, which culminated with the interview of a staff member. John’s essay specifically focuses on the pros and cons of unstructured versus structured interviews. The excerpt below again tends toward a simplistic discussion of the subject, one which makes absolute assertions, bordering on hyperbole:

‘structured interviews use closed questions that tend to require one-word answers such as yes or no, consequently, the data obtained is of a quantitative nature. Quantitative data is easily replicable, meaning that the same interview could be conducted in the future. They also tend to be high in reliability because the schedule – as opposed to a plan – ensures that the interview measures exactly what the study aimed to measure. As a result of this, the findings also have high levels of validity because the findings can be successfully generalised to the entire population’.

John makes claims which are difficult to support and comes across as showing a lack of understanding of the subject. In his interview, he provided a clue with regard to his initial lack of engagement with the text (though he never specifically referred to the terms ‘critical

engagement'). Though this is based, certainly in the view of the lecturers, on a lack of background reading and subsequent reliance on personal impression, John stated that he had difficulties with understanding the questions that were set for the assignments (which in turn could lead to a lack of engagement with the question). Specifically, he commented that there was a "lot of jargon" in the essay questions, though by year three, he admitted that he had learned to "translate" the questions, putting them in "easy terms" – thus his attempt to "conceptualise the question".

An example of an essay question is provided below, taken from the first year Aspects of Language course unit:

The components of your literacy portfolio should include:

Samples of literacy materials that you encounter, use and create in your own life, with their relevance clearly explained.

The materials will be accompanied by an analytical piece of writing which should not exceed 3000 words. In this piece of writing, you will be expected to:

Reflect critically on the variety and scope of your own literacy practices, and provide evidence of that variety and scope.

- *Describe and reflect on any particular changes to your own literacy practices that you are experiencing in your new university life.*
- *Demonstrate your understanding of the social theory of literacy provided by David Barton, and of the concepts of 'literacy events' and 'literacy practices', by applying these ideas to your analysis of your own literacy practices.*

Though technical terms such as 'literacy practice' and 'literacy event' are clearly discussed in class lecture, it could be that students still struggle to understand the terms in synonymous, everyday language. Indeed, one of the lecturers interviewed teaches the Literacy class and said that "sometimes students do not really grasp or understand key ideas or are not able to write about ideas in an appropriate manner. For example, students use the term 'literacy practices' in assignments in a way which shows they have not understood the idea. If students have not encountered terms or ideas sufficiently in background reading this shows in their assignments".

Interestingly, the fact that a lack of background reading is referenced as a reason for a subsequent lack of understanding of technical terms suggests again that from the individual

lecturer's experience (and from the author's own experiences), students often do not demonstrate in their essays that they have read the assigned work. One reason for this declaration is that many students, especially in year one, tend to over rely on lecture notes and those gleaned from the class handouts. While this could suggest that they lack the confidence to make a more original argument, it also suggests that they are relying on classwork only, having not conducted outside reading on the subject.

However, the score of 70 for John's groupwork essay – the only first class score given for any of his essays – is worthy of note. On the feedback sheet, the marker states the following:

“the strength of this assignment was the way you embedded your analysis in a narrative of what happened in your group. This gave your writing a firm structure. The other strength was your critical analysis of the literature since you didn't just accept authors' claims at face value. I would strongly encourage you to engage in more of this kind of writing in the future”.

One explanation for the comparatively high score for this essay could be due to the nature of the assignment itself. Working in groups (in this case, a group of four), students are asked to design a poster and give a subsequent presentation, based on a relevant subject to working in groups (e.g. leadership or majority influence). The essay is then required to discuss the choice made for the poster, and base it within the literature. As John was working in a group, and therefore had access to the opinions and feedback of others when designing the poster, this arguably helped him to consider better ideas and reconsider his own perhaps; this may have contributed to the first class score that he received.

Moreover, being in a position to discuss the group dynamics from a more personalized perspective may also have helped John. Though this more personalized tone is common within LLC writing, it is more common in some essays than others and in the context of discussing dynamics of a group, the fact that it is both personal experience and *recent* experience may have helped John:

“All four members of the group acted tentatively and no one appeared willing to express themselves too forcefully. The reason for this was likely the desire to ‘fit in’ and not upset the group dynamic. This idea can be expanded upon using Asch's (1951) studies”.

The first sentence illustrates a more personal discussion regarding the group dynamic, offers a possible reason for the dynamic and then grounds this in theory (the excerpt offered

above, however, does not include the more detailed discussion of the work of Asch and group conformity that John leads into). This is one example of how John neither offers a hyperbolic statement, nor does he make unsupported assertions; instead he offers a personal observation and relates it to the literature and this makes for good writing. Self-reflection is an important aspect of LLC writing, as mentioned earlier, and students are able to therefore offer personal experiences within their essays, often as support, provided of course that this is balanced with more theoretical discussion.

Table 2.

Year One Essay Scores

Aspects of Literacy	Introduction to Grammar	Reading Processes	Phonetics	Aspects of Communication	Research Methods	Groupwork	Average Score
38	40	55	54	44	51	70	50

4.2 Year Two

For his year two essays, an improved average essay score of 57 is noted. However, John’s essays continue in places to display the same weaknesses that were noted in his year one work. In this sense, his writing has not developed as it might be hoped, still displaying a lack of understanding of the material and subsequent lack of analysis.

For his Literacy and Social Development essay, John’s score of 48 reflects several weaknesses. The first comment from the lecturer is that John “didn’t really engage with the question very much...where you did engage with the question, you made some generalised claims in order to agree which were not substantiated with evidence”. The question was based on the need to analyse a statement which argues for literacy as a human right for all children, as a means to help them be successful in life. Students were required to subsequently discuss the evidence which underpins the statement and discuss whether or not they agree.

After beginning his essay with background information, John culminates with his thesis, aiming “to look into whether or not their (i.e. the UN) ideology that literacy can change lives, is actually happening”. The thesis is clear in purpose and actually implies a certain disagreement with the statement of the UN about the benefits of literacy. What then follows is a broad background discussion to the various arguments put forward in favor of literacy.

However, in the fourth body paragraph, John suddenly seems to change focus, alerting the reader that he agrees with the statement that “all that the UN says comes about as a result of literacy”. This is comparatively a more focused and precise thesis statement and for that reason, should be placed in the introduction, not a body paragraph. The lecturer does not comment on this specific point, instead stating “you say you’re going to agree with UNESCO but I found very little explanation as to why which was based on any real evidence”. This comment reveals that the placement of the thesis was regarded as less fundamental to the fact that there was little evidence to support and illustrate it.

This again points to a central weakness of John’s writing, as does further feedback, namely that John “has not fully grasped the theories” he is discussing; this indicates once more a lack of understanding of the subject. Again, it is suggested that a lack of understanding is reason for a subsequent lack of critical engagement with, and analysis of, the essay question itself. Without adequate understanding, it is difficult to see how a student can effectively analyse that which is not clearly understood in the first instance. A reliance on description, rather than analysis, was also noted in the lecturer feedback, in addition to an oversimplification of the issues.

Bold language is also noted, such as “UNESCO are likely to be biased”, which, while being illustrative of the aforementioned oversimplification of the issues, also weakens a thesis which claims to *agree* with UNESCO’s claims:

“To conclude on the issue of literacy rates in women, the sources cannot be ignored. Both the film and the article were produced by UNESCO, therefore are likely to be biased in order to suit there (sic) needs which in this case, is convincing the audience that they are successfully combating literacy throughout the World. I do agree with their statement, facts and figures, but I also bear in mind the purpose of their publications”.

The mention of “purpose of their publications” caused the lecturer to write the following in the margin: *‘so? what is your critique?’* This suggests that John missed an opportunity to ‘go further’ with his comments, which otherwise could have led to more analysis.

John mentioned in the interview that the following were evidence of being, in his words, a “proficient academic writer”: “correct referencing”, “doing the research” and “understanding the topic”. The first point is relevant in that his references within the text very often did not offer a specific year of research, just the author’s name. The actual references page also

tended to not offer information with regard to the publisher and city of publication of the book referenced. Therefore, while some development was noted throughout his essays in this regard, it was sporadic. This was based on the fact that incorrect referencing was still an issue for some final-year essays, but not for others. As the Harvard system is used throughout, it is difficult to understand exactly why a student would have correct formatting in some instances, but not in others, especially when initial mistakes in this area were pointed out via essay feedback.

The second point regarding “doing the research” perhaps ties in with feedback which alerted John to the need for more background reading, a point commented on by lecturers, both as part of his essay feedback and in the interviews. The final point suggests that John believes his understanding of the essay questions and overall subject has improved, which ties in with an earlier comment made by John in the interview, in which he said that he had developed a better understanding of the actual essay question by being able to “translate” the question into more understandable and less technical terms. The fact that John acknowledges improved understanding of specific areas which were in need of improvement does not translate into improved writing ability of course and based on the average score for year two work, in addition to lecturer feedback, it is suggested that John’s overall writing ability still largely displays the same weaknesses as year one.

The score of 66 for his research journal is quite good, but is indicative of different scoring criteria. All LLC students must conduct an extended piece of research in year two, which culminates in the writing of a 6000 word report. Part of this requirement is the writing of a research journal, which by its nature is not held to the usual standards of academic writing. Instead, it is simply required to provide a weekly, or even daily, account of the student’s difficulties, and triumphs, involved with the research process, but students are free to handwrite their journal in language that best suits their needs. While students are scored based on their honesty and evidence of having gained a better understanding of the research process, their use of language and style are not relevant criteria as long as the writing is of course understood and legible. There is of course a need for analysis, and a comment does mention that “self-reflection might have been more probing in places”, but overall, John has done well in this piece of writing. It might be that in the context of an essay which is free from the usual academic requirements regarding style, presentation, referencing and even structure, John is better positioned to focus simply on the task at hand for the most part. Therefore, in the context of such an inherently personal essay, perhaps the most personal of all LLC essays, John finds it easier to engage with the question, to include improved analysis.

Though not the highest score, John's work for his Words and Context essay reveals development in areas that had been commented on previously as being in need of work. The written feedback on the front of the feedback sheet is quite encouraging; "this essay has the potential to be first class: the hypothesis is excellent and points of the analysis are very convincing". Nonetheless, the feedback on the reverse suggests there are still deficiencies:

Argument and structure – "Confused in places"

Knowledge and understanding – "Mostly good"

Use of sources – "Appropriate"

Analysis – "Convincing"

Presentation and language – "Poor"

The specific question revolved around the need to analyse a corpus-based collection of one or more words/phrases with a view to explaining how data-driven analysis can enhance understanding of language. With this directive in mind, John presents a background to the subject in his opening paragraph, consisting of defining corpora and their uses, leading into his statement that he will analyse the contrasts and comparisons between *have to* and *have got to*. The specific thesis is then presented, which aims "to focus on the context in which each is regularly used based on looking into which words they often appear alongside in a sentence".

The reasons for the score of 2:1, however (i.e. as opposed to a first class score), are clearly pointed out to John as part of the more informative feedback on the reverse side of the feedback sheet. Specifically, the lecturer comments that John's literature review is placed toward the end and there is no explicit methodology section. In this case, the need for better structure would have aided in an increased final score. It is for this reason that the lecturer's comment for presentation (and language) is "poor". The score for this essay, in addition to the research journal, might help to explain John's earlier comments regarding improvement, especially in the area of understanding the question.

For his research project, a 6000 word report on a topic of the student's choosing, John received a score of 54 – thus representing an average overall assessment. John chose to investigate how effective website advertising campaigns are for the company Passenger Focus, which governs the British rail industry. Specifically, John focused on ethnic minorities, the disabled and the poor in terms of how inclusive the advertising campaigns are. The research report is an important essay in that it represents the first piece of extended

research that the students are responsible for. More than just advancing from essays of an average length of 2000 words to 6000 words, the student is now forced to choose his/her own research topic, as opposed to being given one. This suggests that students are better positioned to investigate which specific aspects of the program interest them – language, literacy and/or communication – and perhaps find the writing task a bit more relevant to their interests and future careers. Moreover, the report is a multi-draft essay, further suggesting that students might be better placed to receive a higher score based on having a chance to attend to earlier weaknesses with initial drafts. However, it is unknown how many drafts, if any, John produced before the final report was submitted.

The feedback tends to again focus more on macro-level issues relating to the essay's main focus and lack of discussion. Specifically, the focus on 'hard to reach groups' was not sufficiently included in the essay, with essay feedback reading, "author had not got to the hard to reach groups in any sense so conclusions very limited in value". With regard to the literature review, the feedback echoed this, stating that the literature "contained nothing about advertising and hard to reach groups or even about the nature of the hard to reach groups". Finally, in terms of research methods, the lecturer questioned the choice of university students for the sample, in that "they are all fully literate, can cope well with English and would have above average ability to use the internet". This comment reflects the fact that John had argued that the hard to reach groups might have difficulties with literacy and internet ability, hence making the exploration of this group a worthy investigation, a point which the marker concurred with, stating, however, "an admirable but difficult aim".

Samples from John's report illustrate again how conclusions are drawn based more on personal belief, rather than informed analysis and support. For example, based on the fact that several ethnic groups (white, black and Asian) found the website easy to use, John concludes that "I would argue on the whole that www.passengerfocus.co.uk is largely usable by a wide variety of ethnic groups". The written comment in the margin reads "but they are all educated students", linking with the previous feedback offered in the paragraph above. However, John's reasoning is somewhat naive, certainly in terms of conducting research, in that he over-generalizes to broader populations, without at least acknowledging in his analysis the very comment that the marker wrote in the margin. Such generalizations on John's part can also be reflective of a lack of analysis, purely based on the fact that conclusions are drawn quite rapidly, without giving further thought.

Table 3.

Year Two Essay Scores

Literacy and Social Development	Ethnographic Research	Fieldwork Proposal	Fieldwork Journal	Fieldwork Report	Career Management	Words and Context	Average Score
45	61	63	66	54	59*	61	57

** Though the class score awarded was 59, the score was further reduced to 49, based on a deduction of 10% due to John's absences in the class.*

4.3 Year Three

For the final year essay analysis, the dissertation has been selected for the primary focus (though all essay scores are provided). Like the research report in year two, the dissertation comprises a subject of the student's choosing with the need to conduct research, often involving questionnaires, interviews and/or focus groups. However, as the dissertation is 12,000 words long, there is the implication for it being a particularly challenging piece of work. On the other hand, it would be hoped that students will have developed their academic writing skills sufficiently to be better positioned to take on such a demanding piece of writing. One lecturer said in interview that "on the whole third year LLC students are better writers and better at writing dissertations than BA Education students. Sometimes BA Education students require more support to write in the required format. These differences could be because LLC students are more language aware and are often younger with a more recent education background". This offers one justification as to why the dissertation comprises the main focus of John's final year written work, in addition to a quotation from Schleppegrell (2001: 437), who believes that the research paper, which the dissertation clearly is, to be 'the most advanced of the school-based genres', hence a fitting culmination of John's written academic work for analytical purposes.

First, however, a brief discussion is given regarding the feedback for two specific final year essays, to present a more balanced picture of John's overall essay output throughout all three years. Comments from the Participatory Photography course point toward a lack of analysis, coupled with unsupported assertions; "in places this is rather a self-congratulatory piece of writing". This comment refers to declarations of success for John's project, which involved discussing photographs of the School of Education building, thus tying in with

visual literacy. However, the lecturer writes “there is no real analysis of the reasons for the apparent success”. Furthermore, the feedback states that “sub-headings would have helped provide more structure overall”, thus relating to the ‘argument and structure’ category of feedback.

The second essay assignment of two for the Discourse and Narrative Analysis course reflects a score of 63 and reasons for the higher score include a “very well organised submission”, suggesting an improvement with overall coherence and structure. In addition, the research aims, to analyse the spoken discourse of two soccer fans who support two rival British teams, is judged to be “investigated with intelligence and enthusiasm”. Clearly, John is capable of producing more quality work. Perhaps the higher score is based on a possible enjoyment of soccer; if so, this might have helped him to write the essay with increased clarity as it is based on a subject that is a personal hobby, thus accounting for the “enthusiasm”. Writing from such a personalized perspective was also put forth as a possible reason for the higher score for the year two research journal.

A coherent structure within this essay is facilitated by the use of subheadings, such as **1.0 Data, 2.0 Research Questions, 3.0 Methodology** and so on. Arguably, the need for such topic divisions in John’s 6000 word research report has helped him to consider such subdivisions for his third year work, notably this particular essay. The comment of an intelligent discussion of the research aims can be seen by various examples of John discussing the discourse and then applying it to what has been said within the actual theory (or vice versa), with the theory effectively being used to support his own personal claims, albeit not presented in an overly assertive manner (e.g. in this essay, he introduces his assertions with hedged expressions such as *it seems here that...*). For example, John references Wiemann and Knapp (1975) who discuss the use of back-channel cues in speaking, to include fillers such as ‘mmm’ and ‘oh’. This is then followed by examples of the soccer fans’ discourse:

Chelsea: Get in! Even better.

Arsenal: Oh. Right. OK.

An analysis of the two lines of dialogue continues, referencing the work of other theorists, such as Drew and Heritage (2006). As analytical skills are so important, John’s writing here displays improvement within this area.

For his dissertation, however, John relied on too much personal opinion regarding matters

related to his subject – an investigation into how much female characters are subjected to the ‘male gaze’ in modern films – essentially, a focus on how sexualised female leads are with regard to clothing, looks and so on. Regarding ‘argument and structure’, the main weakness is the fact that the argument is not consistent, and, as before, questionable assertions are made without support; as the lecturer notes regarding the argument, “it’s very intuitive-driven”. An example of both issues is seen within the two excerpts below:

“Women in society recognise that in order to achieve status and power over male counterparts they must firstly adopt and even accept the 'Male Gaze' before they can act upon it and capitalise”.

“teenage - and even younger girls - are feeling the need to become sex objects and appeal to what men want. Surely this is not a sign of female empowerment starting at an early age, but rather the worrying effects media messages can have”.

On the one hand, John argues that the objectification of women in film can be used by women to their advantage, by women in society emulating cinematic standards of beauty and expressing their sexuality (e.g. with their choice of clothing). However, John also acknowledges that this is a trend being copied by young girls, something which is arguably difficult to ‘capitalise’ on. Furthermore, the first excerpt is overly assertive, made without the benefit of any relevant literature or theory, unlike John’s work for his groupwork and discourse and narrative analysis essays, which integrated personal opinion and theory smoothly.

For ‘presentation and language’, John’s feedback reads “very personalised responses in places”, such as John’s comment which reads “I believe that real women recognise that in order to succeed, they must embrace their role as a sex symbol...the filmic women do; as a result, they always come out on top”. It is hard to perhaps find support for such broad assertions in the first instance, thus giving a need at least to hedge these claims. The more personalized stance which is valued in LLC writing does not of course supersede the need for support and especially to place one’s personal views within the actual literature.

In terms of the analysis, “too much description of responses” was the comment offered, referring to the responses of the participants who had watched three screened films as part of the research: *Kill Bill*, *Charlie’s Angels* and *Tomb Raider*. Essentially, John presents their responses regarding how physically attractive they perceive the women to be, but without

adding further analysis, in terms of perhaps speculating what the implications of their responses might be (for example, offering an analysis of how the male and female participants may have perceived female beauty differently).

Even with the benefit of a multi-draft approach for his dissertation, John did not necessarily take on board earlier comments which pointed to these central weaknesses, thus resulting in a final score of 56. A comment made by a lecturer who was interviewed states that “from supervising dissertation students it is apparent when students have not done enough background reading to talk about their ideas competently. In terms of their development tutor feedback and the re-drafting process during dissertation writing allows students to rectify these weaknesses”. While John did receive adequate guidance from his supervisor (the author) and had several drafts, the fact remains that initial feedback was not taken on board.

Table 4.
Year Three Essay Scores

Discourse and Narrative Analysis, part I	Discourse and Narrative Analysis, part II	Participatory Photography	Reading Film	The Portrayal of Education in Literature	Leadership in Action	Dissertation	Average Score
56	63	52	50	56	49	56	55

5. Discussion of the Results

Based on the yearly average scores – 50, 57, 55 – John would appear to have not developed a great deal in terms of his overall quality of essay writing. Moreover, the central weaknesses in his writing, though apparently overcome in his first year groupwork essay, remained for the most part – a lack of support for otherwise ambitious claims, very often made based on intuitive responses, and weak analysis. Clearly, a need to analyse the question even further to avoid superficial responses would appear to be one of John’s main difficulties. On a more narrow level, John also shows inconsistent improvement for his references section, conforming to the correct format for Harvard referencing in several essays throughout his three years, only to make mistakes on other occasions, as was mentioned earlier. An example is seen with his third year Discourse and Narrative Analysis essays, in

which the entries within the references section are written thus (whereas the formatting was correct for the dissertation):

Labov, W. (1972)

Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular

Oxford

Basil Blackwell

The reference above should integrate all information on one line, indenting for subsequent lines of text. It may be a relatively minor point, but it nonetheless ties in with inconsistent referencing on John's part from one essay to the next.

It is suggested overall, therefore, that John's belief that he had seen a noticeable improvement in his writing is not born out of the results. For example, despite the aforementioned lack of consistency with regard to his formatting usage for the references section, he mentioned in the interview that "correct referencing" was one way in which he considered himself to be a proficient academic writer. Furthermore, he mentioned the fact that he had been made aware, through both written and oral feedback, of the need for correct referencing. This strongly suggests that John is indeed aware of this deficiency, yet has not attended to it consistently, though all formatting was correct for his dissertation (perhaps based on the chance to revise his dissertation, thus being able to correct initial mistakes).

John also mentioned that, in terms of the ways in which he considered himself a proficient academic writer, "doing the research" was his initial response, followed by good academic writing "starts with your understanding of the topic". These two comments appear to refer to one of his writing weaknesses, a lack of understanding of the topic, perhaps more so for year one essays, which may have impacted on his analytical skills. The former comment addresses the need, mentioned by lecturers for his first year work in particular, to do more reading of the subject. It could be that a lack of textbook reading may have also led to his lack of understanding, when it could have helped to clarify the subject matter instead.

Two final comments John made with regard to his writing development refer to the fact that he is still developing. First, he specifically mentioned the development involved within an actual class, saying that development in this instance "starts from day one – like a 12 week process". More broadly, however, John also stated that his writing development was a "work in process, still improving". This suggests that John is aware, on a certain level perhaps, that improvement is still needed within his essay writing, despite some earlier comments which

suggest he is quite confident in his overall writing ability.

Arguably John's main weaknesses – an overall lack of analysis – ties in with the results of the previous study undertaken by the author, in which the academic writing development of six LLC students was also analysed across a three-year perspective. While only three essays from years one and two were analysed, in conjunction with the final year dissertation, the results of their initial writing weaknesses are quite similar. For example, a comment from a lecturer regarding a student's essay within the previous study stated the need to consider "raising the analytical style". Comments of this kind were the rule, not the exception.

Like John, the students in the previous study of LLC writing merely described the subject within their essays, more so in year one, instead of writing a more expository-based essay which involves the need for engagement with the research of other theorists. This also relates to the study of Hoadley-Maidment (1997:67), in which she states that many of the tutors' comments for the essays in the study included the following: "need to be more analytic"; "difference between description (too much) and illustration (too little)" and "need to move to analytic approach". Clearly, the need to analyse the subject and show evidence of applying one's knowledge to the subject is something that first-year undergraduates overall may struggle with. The study of Beaufort (2004:176), in which the writing development of a history student was analysed, also reveals initial weaknesses which correlate with those of John's writing: 'faulty logic; faulty interpretive frame; too speculative'. These are suggested to be issues which are not necessarily tied to one specific discipline, especially since the need for logic, clear interpretation and well supported claims are hallmarks of good writing throughout all disciplines.

Regarding the question of what is expected of LLC graduates in terms of overall writing development, two lecturers expressed their views during the interview; "graduates should be able to write clear, well substantiated work, using appropriate literature and be able to present a coherent argument which needs to convince the reader and be critical and analytical". This is something which John, certainly based on the final-year dissertation, has not been able to do effectively. Another lecturer, however, acknowledged that "it is rare to get all round development to the level that might be hoped for", commenting further that some weaknesses are not improved upon – such as John's analytical abilities – but there is improvement elsewhere. In John's case, there were of course improvements made in terms of analysis, consistency of focus and positioning his personal views within the literature; however, these improvements were not consistently seen and inconsistency seems to be an apt description of John's overall writing output.

6. Conclusion

The academic writing development of one undergraduate cannot of course be generalized to all undergraduates, nor can it be generalized to students within the same academic program. It is suggested, however, that some of the difficulties faced by John within his writing are perhaps common to most first-year undergraduates who are attempting to get to grips with the demands of academic writing at the university level, based on the author's teaching experiences in universities in both the US and the UK. Analysis of one's essay subject, however, is not a subject that can be taught *per se*. Most, if not all, US universities require students to take a class which falls within the area of 'critical thinking', such as literature-based courses. In cases such as this, literature is the subject being taught, with critical thinking the *approach* taken toward the subject, part of a skill that arguably develops over the course of time; this is a skill which John is arguably still in need of further developing. Based on previous studies, such as Hoadley-Maidment (1997) and Baratta (2007), students would appear to perhaps have difficulties with analytical skills, relying more on relatively superficial description of the subject. Related to this is the fact that from personal experience, first-year LLC students often rely on reciting information from lecture notes for both assessed essays and exams. This may of course indicate trepidation on the students' part in terms of offering their own original insights with regard to the material, believing that it might be a 'safer' option to refer to material covered in class instead.

In terms of more micro-level feedback, such as that which deals with syntactic problems, the feedback within the LLC program often refers more to broader issues, such as consistency of argument and the essay structure, knowledge and understanding and of course the need for analysis. This also ties in with the study of Hoadley-Maidment (1997:63), who found that the Open University tutors' feedback for the essays was mainly focused on 'teaching skills for writing argument, rather than dealing with linguistic development *per se*'. The following comments found in the Hoadley-Maidment study are similar to those given by the LLC lecturers as part of this study: "watch your sentences"; "sentence too long"; "this is not a sentence"; and "watch your punctuation" (page 62). It seems, then, at least based on the work of Hoadley-Maidment and the current study, that when comments are provided that focus on syntax errors, they don't *identify* the problem as such (e.g. a run-on sentence, sentence fragment and so on).

Overall, it is argued that John's development within his academic writing has not been entirely consistent, as difficulties faced with his first-year essays appear to have remained throughout all three years. The lecturer feedback consistently references poor analysis, often

based on intuitive-based responses (sometimes hyperbolic in nature), lack of understanding and lack of support. While there has been some improvement in his essay writing, it has been sporadic in nature, perhaps suggesting that John has simply engaged more with some subjects than with others (e.g. based on a personal interest of the essay subject). This, however, was not the case with the dissertation, in which John chose to analyse film based on his enjoyment of motion pictures, but still displayed weaknesses with his analysis. Further, having a better understanding of academic writing conventions does not always translate into better production of academic texts, a point that was made earlier. In John's case, more time is perhaps needed to overcome writing weaknesses which are still in evidence. As a lecturer mentioned in interview "ideally students should be fluent writers, with a good grasp of grammar and be eloquent in both speech and writing. Part of progress on the course is also getting students to lose some of their bad habits". This comment was given in terms of what is expected of LLC graduates; the fact that it is an ideal suggests it is not reality of course and some students do not always lose bad (writing) habits even given the three years (or more) of a degree program to develop in this area.

The results here also correlate with those from the case study of Beaufort (2004), in which Tim, a history student, made 'limited progress' (page 176) in his overall writing development. Beaufort suggests that this is partly due to a lack of explicit instruction of the writing task, in addition to a lack of overall knowledge regarding the conventions of academic writing within the history community; these findings suggest two factors: First, US writing classes tend to focus on writing from a generic approach; teaching skills which unite the writing of all disciplines (e.g. maintaining a consistent focus), but not preparing students for discipline-specific writing (and from personal experience of teaching composition in the US, a given writing class may have up to a dozen different academic majors). Second, in the absence of writing classes in toto within the UK (i.e. they are not offered consistently nationwide), might British students struggle that bit more if not even given generic instruction in how to write and like Tim, partly at least, have to rely on intuition to negotiate their way around the writing process? Indeed, Haas (1994:43) suggests that 'instructional support' is a contributing factor in the developmental success of Eliza (the student in her case study) in her reading and writing, again emphasising the need for 'novices' to be given help from 'insiders', part of the process of scaffolded instruction.

It is acknowledged, however, that the results in this study are not necessarily illuminating, as they arguably reveal what lecturers of undergraduates in particular already know. The comments made by the three LLC lecturers interviewed in this study, as well as personal

experience by the author, that a lack of analytical ability and avoidance of background reading are common weaknesses, is perhaps nothing new to lecturers in general. Nonetheless, the results here do at least reinforce common knowledge perhaps and in turn, point toward the need for undergraduate students to be offered perhaps more assistance with their writing beyond merely having meetings with their lecturers, a point already stressed. This goal of increased student assistance has hopefully been met with the initiation of an academic writing course in the LLC program in the fall of 2009, mirrored on the US Freshman Composition class. While academic writing development takes more than the length of a semester-long writing class and cannot of course guarantee that students will develop from an 'all round' perspective, it can help students to better understand what is expected of them regarding their academic writing at the university level and from here, perhaps minimise their future writing weaknesses.

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