

Writing conferences

What follows is the transcript of a writing conference. The conferences were conducted in 1999 as part of a research project into first year undergraduate student writing. The aim of the project was to discover, in the context of findings from the literature on compositional research, the variation in student understanding of academic writing tasks, and how students could be helped to improve their writing. I took as my baseline approach the format of student conference advocated by Scardamalia & Bereiter (1986). But I was also interested in exploring the affective domain of the writing tasks. And I needed to help students practically.

Seven students were asked to write two 500-word essays. The author interviewed students (5–10 mins max.) pre- and post-essay, using techniques originally developed in-depth by Scardamalia & Bereiter. I documented the attempt to tackle the genre difficulties facing students in first-year legal studies by using an ‘essay conference’, modelled on the guidance given by Scardamalia and Bereiter, whereby students were encouraged to ‘internalise’ structures of argument and where the tutor would scaffold the defining features for the student in the initial interview.¹ I began to realise that Scardamalia and Bereiter’s model of the ‘assisted monologue’ could be adapted to be more productive. Instead of adopting a ‘prompt’ role, I adopted more of a collaborative role in understanding the students’ construction of meaning – what Carl Rogers described as being a ‘confident companion’ to the student (Rogers 1980).

PAUL MAHARG AND STUDENT [MM]: INTERVIEW 4

[...]

PM Right as an introduction what’s happening here?

MM It’s not going into the question much it’s just giving a general outline. It’s not saying what the question was about. It’s just saying, mmm...it’s just part of the question really what’s there’s not all of it.

PM Mm mm Right so if we say - kind of summarise what you have said there - part of the question - not going into the question. Anything else?

MM Doesn’t say what kind of legislation is outside, could have gone into more like what sort of legislation it was and everything. Could have written more on delegated legislation I think.

PM Mm....do you think that this should be in an introduction?

MM No it should have been later on, later on I think.

¹ In the words of Scardamalia and Bereiter (1986), ‘A more readily internalizable form [than dialogue] might be the “assisted monologue” ... where the talking is primarily done by the student, with the teacher inserting prompts rather than conversational turns’ (quoted in Maharg 2000, 90).

PM Right so if that is later on maybe we can take that out.

MM Mmmm

PM Say from there. Where would you want to end the bit that we would take out?

MM Up to the end of the paragraph because it's just.....it's all the one.....I would say I would leave that bit in "Parliament can also delegate legislation to outside bodies" and take it from there onwards because its showing the question is that I am agreeing with it but there is another side to it.

PM So your sentence "I have to agree with this but Parliament can also delegate legislation to outside bodies i.e. access adherent" you would take it from

MM Up to "outside bodies" and then...

PM that's right instead of

MM and then I would go more into the delegated legislation.

PM Right O.K. So If we take that then we can move that somewhere else in the essay

MM Yea

PM later on

PM So then you are left with your introduction being

MM that bit there

PM virtually 3 lines there..... O.K. leaving this chunk of the introduction aside then for the moment, let's go on to the second paragraph let's suppose that that is your first paragraph OK and this is going to be your second paragraph. One of the things we would like to see as I have said is links between paragraphs

MM yeah

PM so that you are forming an argument

MM Yea - I should have put in the bit about the statutes before I actually put in about the section division

PM Yes I would agree with that.

MM I explain generally what the statute is for but in between the two sections... in between the two paragraphs and then go in to say what the acts are

there for like for legal civil criminal the criminal side and then go into that and then say right...

PM Right, that's exactly what you could do there. The title of the essay is really to discuss this quotation from Tindall and I think what you must beware of is going into a general description of what statutes are - I think this is relevant but I think it is important to tie it into the question here.

MM Yeah break it down and how it works and all that.

PM Yes that's right can you see?

MM Yeah I can see the question I just couldn't I knew what I wanted to say in the essay but I just couldn't put it down. In my other one I actually taped it first

PM Mmm

MM I sat and I had all my notes down I just relayed off what I wanted to say and then just took it bit by bit - that's relevant to that and that's relevant to that and then done it. So I took your advice on Wednesday night and I was up to 4 o'clock on Thursday morning doing that essay right enough. I did! I taped it first and then when I sat down with all my notes bits of paper here and I went, well I'm wantin that in this bit here so I would have it all and this is to be added in to such and such a bit and this is to be added into so when I was writing it out again I was like that Right my paper was like bits here and bits there and I thought Good grief! So there was paper everywhere.

PM But did the taping of it work?

MM Yeah I find it a lot easier, a lot easier because my brain works faster than my writing so if I've said it all right I've added that bit and that bit so that's fine I'll just write it out what I have said and then I can add the bits in here, there and everywhere and I thought well that's it - perfect, got it.

PM Mmm Grand I thought that would help. That technique would help with this as well because what you are doing is cutting and pasting and moving about. What you have here is a good essay but it's...

MM it's in different order

PM That's right

MM it's all in different order and as I said I was actually at a class and I was e-mailing my friend I says I am actually sitting typing my essay out and I says it's a lot of shit, I don't know what I have did wrong I says but it's just absolutely crap.

PM. Mmmm right

- MM** So I knew myself it was just absolutely, totally, it's not what I wanted it to say, it's not exactly what I wanted it to say, I mean, Friday afternoon at half past three I was still typing it out and I thought this is ridiculous I've usually got everything done by now. I just couldn't for the life of me get what I wanted down on paper and I thought there is no point in changing it now it's too late - it's to be in for 4 o'clock. Just a fail, I just knew it right away I was like that there's no way that's gonny pass.
- PM** It's a dreadful feeling that, isn't it?
- MM** Oh no I knew myself I had even said, I says the essay is a lot of crap, I says it's total and utter rubbish that's in it. But now I can see it, I have looked at it at home, I mean I've got a copy in the house and I have actually sat and read it I thought I should have put that there, and that there and that should have been further on.
- PM** Yes Yes O.K if we move to this paragraph here I am questioning the relevance here of this part here. Can you see maybe why I am questioning the relevance.
- MM** Yeah because I have not put in why
- PM** Right
- MM** The formal title and what it represents and what it actually means and later on saying well the reason for formal title is because of...it's a brief description of well I put down the formal title briefly describes what the act is all about but I should have put more about it.
- PM** That's right yes with reference to the question itself. You were asked to actually discuss. Right if we turn to the fifth - what I am saying here that it may well be that your audience doesn't need to know that in which case then you don't have to put it in. Now similarly there I think that is the problem something it's I think that is quite easily dealt with once you see the relevance of the material to your audience. I would say this is quite relevant stuff although it seems very relevant, it's irrelevant on two counts firstly, your audience knows that, the examiner who is reading it, but secondly, going back to that...
- MM** Yes. again it's not just Parliament it's the European Community.
- PM** Yes OK can you see what's going wrong with this paragraph here?
- MM** Yes I'm taking that as my personal opinion that bit there and I shouldn't have. Again a lot of people read an Act of Parliament and put their way, the way they want it to be again I can see that bit there yeah and that bit I should have put a wee bit more in on why I changed the Act to suit myself.
- PM** Exactly. More evidence on how you read it.
- MM** I could have written about 10 pages on it.

PM On reading it?

MM I had a fight with a woman the other morning because I got a letter through saying I took this [ie the law school course] up to settle the custody of [child's name] back and get one over and I says Excuse me that is not the case Oh we were under the understanding that you took that course. I says No I took that course because I was wanting to do that course. I say OK the course had helped me get a line on things but it is not because of your department I says because for a lone person having kids at the school I can do things now it's nothing to do with your department. I was actually on the phone to the Legal Department as well and I says your Children's (Scotland) Act you are sitting there reading it to suit yourselves and she was like that! [draws astonished expression] I say I have actually got it here sitting in front of me and she's Oh eh well

PM No they're not used to clients quoting it back at them

MM No I've been doing it for quite a while. Under section such and such of Children (Scotland) Act you can't do that and I have got the right for that...

PM You've got a lot of experience there, personal experience of the Act

MM Aye

PM and it's powerful stuff and great you can use it that way. See that experience, you need to turn it into no turn it towards this essay. In some ways your way of understanding the law is way beyond this [essay]. But you need to find a way to bring it into the essay so that, so that it helps you to structure it.

MM How?

PM I think, I think if we go back to the phone call, you know who you're talking to and what you need to do

MM Mmm

PM but in this essay you need to turn your experience of using the statute to the point of the essay. Actually, that experience of the phone calls, keep that you'll use it later I'm sure. But here in the essay, who are you writing for? It's not that woman at the other end of the phone.

MM Yeah

PM You can't afford to write 10 pages, and they might not be the right 10 pages anyway, but you can use some of that knowledge as a for instance, like here.

MM Yeah, ok.

PM Right those are the general points that I would like to make about the essay. They are summarised here at the end but it is good that you were able to see it in the text itself.

MM Yeah I look at it now and I thought and I compared it with that one and I thought No I'll just sit and do it again I'll tape it out first and then I'll sit and do it

PM That's good, taping is actually something you could do a bit more of, you could extend it into other areas of study skills because that obviously works for you.

MM It does I mean even at school I actually remembered how I did it

PM That very interesting because you are relearning what you already knew. At university you are relearning.

MM it's 16 years since I have been at school so it all goes out the window.

PM It does this is the problem.

MM It all goes out the window I mean when I first came back I was like that - how am I going to do this, I have not done essays since I was 16 year old, and I just couldn't for the life of me remember how passing exams I was like that, how can I get back into this. I think I've made a mistake here but I thought I'm going to do it as a challenge and that's it. I can always say I've tried and that's the end of it.

PM Well, I think you're learning an awful lot from this and this is the start not the end. This is the first time you are doing this in 16 years so it's important you get feedback though you're giving most of the feedback, and I think the sort of learning that you have put into this is already appearing in your second essay. It looks a lot more mature in the way that you are threading the argument together.

MM That's what I did, I sat for hours and hours I think I did about a tape and a half and I was like that Right I'll take this bit out, I don't need it and I had written it all out and I thought well I don't need that bit and that bit I do need so the place was full of paper.

PM Good

MM I got up on Thursday morning and thought I'll do it when I come home I'll just leave it.

PM OK well we'll leave it there too. What are you going to take away from the session?

MM Taping it works for the structure, get the intro sorted and it helps the rest, try to, to use your own experience in a way that helps your essay.

PM Helpful?

MM Totally.

REFERENCES

- Maharg, P. (2000) 'Context cues cognition': writing, rhetoric and legal argumentation, in S. Mitchell and R. Andrew (eds) *Learning to Argue in Higher Education*. London, Boynton/Cook, Heinemann.
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