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An "Odd Couple" for Teaching Writing: The Tutorial Takes in the Committee Meeting

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Writing courses are increasingly popular in higher education. This paper presents a pedagogic approach that combines theory and practice, in an accessible way, to help students appreciate the interrelation of styles and contexts, and develop skills for writing in a range of genres. The approach is characterised as *adaptive application*. It is illustrated by the modification of a traditional tutorial-group structure to provide a new setting in which students can immediately apply key terms of rhetorical theory as they negotiate differentiated experiences as writers, readers, speakers, and listeners. This change in classroom practice is achieved by adopting and adapting the roles, organizational genres, and communication conventions of the committee meeting. The resultant hybrid form of committee-tutorial assists students to engage collegially in the disciplinary study and practice of writing. It also encourages them to consider how they may transfer their understanding of rhetorical principles and techniques to writing endeavours in other scholarly and social settings.

Creating a Context for Dialogue Between Writing Theory and Practice

This paper considers a core question in studies of professional writing in the arts and humanities. How can faculty combine theory and practice, within an academic teaching environment, to help students develop the skills that are needed to work in diverse writing genres? One answer lies in creating a classroom learning context that incorporates elements of professional writing practice. Establishing such a context depends on creating, and managing, a series of opportunities to start a conversation between the practice and the disciplinary concepts applied in studying it. This article describes a method, which we call *adaptive application*, for promoting this kind of dialogue.

The method combines three key elements. One is a theoretical framework, based on academic and disciplinary ideas and terminology, for the study of writing. The second is an account of the writing forms, and related communicative activities, that constitute the objects of theoretical and practical study. The third is the pedagogic adaptation of features of the practice being studied, for the teaching and learning context, so that students can make an immediate application of the theoretical concepts in a way designed to help them become more versatile writers and scholars.

The following sections discuss the context in which this triadic approach has been developed. They outline the theoretical framework, which is based on rhetoric, and indicate the range of practices to which it is applied. An example then illustrates the use of a modified form of tutorial group work to help students explore ideas, relevant to those practices, about the role of the writer, working with an audience, and the relation between styles and contexts. This modification of the teaching situation combines different structures of group work. By way of analogy, it involves an interaction like that which happens when, in Neil Simon's 1965 play *The Odd Couple* (and its film and television adaptations), two unconventionally matched characters find themselves sharing the same space. In our teaching and learning place, the odd couple brought together is the writing class and the committee meeting. Academics sometimes assume that the latter is a dry administrative practice that has little or no relationship with scholarly endeavour. However, the committee meeting can be adapted as an innovative process for applying academic concepts and enhancing writing and related skills. In a later section, the paper draws out the research implications of the example, distinguishing the method further by comparing it with some other research on teaching and learning, and suggesting its relevance for cross-disciplinary learning.

The method presented here has developed in the teaching of a subject in the School of Arts at the University of New England, a regional Australian university where, as in many other institutions, writing courses are increasingly popular at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The problem, which is also an opportunity, is how to address the diverse interests, learning needs, and aspirations of students entering these courses. The combination of rhetorical theory and pedagogic practice in the approach that we describe is a response to this problem.

Context, Theory, and Objects of Study

The subject in question, *Writing for Work: Styles and Contexts*, is taken mainly by second and third year undergraduates but also, in a modified version, by candidates in postgraduate coursework programs, up to the Masters level. The students are enrolled in a wide range of programs, from arts and communications to social sciences, education, and law. Some are

immediately able to connect their work on writing to professional interests and career plans. Others are less certain about whether and how the study of writing might have vocational as well as academic relevance. Further complicating the picture is that the students' prior knowledge of writing genres, and their levels of academic and other writing skills, vary considerably. In this institutional context, the purpose of the subject has been to provide students with the means to consider the relations between academic writing and communication forms that they are likely to encounter in other work and community contexts. The subject is available in both on-campus and off-campus mode, but here we are concerned with the connection between the theoretical framework and the strategy used in on-campus classroom teaching only.

The theoretical framework of the unit is based on rhetoric, as the art of using techniques of language, with the idea of helping students to make connections between analyzing the conventions of various genres, as used in already produced works, and embarking on their own writing in diverse forms and styles. The rhetorical approach encourages reflection on the position of the writer, the role of the reader or audience, and the interrelation between communication contexts and styles of writing. However, our use of rhetoric needs to be selective and strategic. Some students study rhetoric in depth in one or more other subjects, whereas others are encountering it, in this subject, for the first time. Our approach, therefore, draws from rhetoric certain principles and guidelines that assist reading and writing across a range of forms.

In particular, the approach concentrates on basic categories that support the study of what Hart & Daughton (2005) call rhetoric as a "situated art" (p. 40). These are the factors of both "text and context" (p. 40) that recur in an indefinite number of communicative acts, while operating together in complex ways in different situations, and hence they can be referred to as rhetorical "variables" (c.f., Hart & Daughton, 2005, p. 47). In their more general study of rhetoric, Hart & Daughton (2005) investigate the variables of *rhetor* (speaker, writer), audience, topic, persuasive field (related discourse on the topic), setting, medium, and culturally based rhetorical conventions (pp. 47-53). For our purpose of exploring connections between academic and public, work-related writing, we assemble our own framework of rhetorical variables, containing nine main elements: purpose; context; writer (author); reader (audience); modes of address, and inclusiveness; medium; genre; content and structure; and style and register. This group of variables allows discussion of elements with which students are already familiar–for example, conventional expectations of structure and style in the traditional academic essay, considered as a genre–as a basis for extending the theoretical and practical study of writing into genres used in new situations.

In the organization of classroom teaching, a lecture format is used to introduce this theoretical framework and associated readings, with examples and brief interactive exercises. So, for instance, the lectures consider the multiple contextual relations that academic, and other professional, written work can have to surrounding statements and discourses, social practices, values and uses of knowledge. Examples of university, student-association, and public policy documents illustrate the variable nature of authorship, as an individual activity, or as a collaborative practice involving the ability to write as part of a team and to give or receive feedback or editorial comment. Similarly, the need to take account of an audience's likely prior knowledge about a topic, familiarity with technical language, and reading skills, is considered by comparing documents published for specialist in contrast to lay audiences in, for instance, public writing in particular health awareness campaigns. At the same time, lectures illustrate the point that many documents have not a single audience but primary and secondary audiences (Snooks & Co., 2002): so, for instance, a thesis examiner's report needs to take into account its functions for both an examination board and the candidate whose work is being commented on and assessed. In turn, this point relates to the variables of address and style–the negotiation of formal, standard or informal registers according to purpose (Snooks & Co., 2002, p. 51), and the ethical consideration of whether one's mode of address is inclusive or exclusive in relation to possible audiences.

In setting up this theoretical approach, lectures introduce students to readings that do not necessarily employ rhetorical terminology explicitly, but nonetheless reinforce the importance of considering the writing variables of context, purpose, authorship, audience, style, and so on (Eunson, 2008; Putnis & Petelin, 1999; Windschuttle & Elliott, 1999). These readings elucidate principles of professional writing that apply to academic as well as other fields of public writing. So they assist the movement, just mentioned, from familiar forms such as the essay to working in new genres.

In conjunction with the theoretical means for considering varied forms of writing, we focus on three main examples: organizational, arts-based, and media-based writing. These "objects of study" allow students to explore, in rhetorical terms, the interrelation between particular uses of writing forms and their contexts. The organizational genres include forms of writing used in the workplace and community, from committee agendas and minutes through to discussion papers, proposals, and reports. As with the other examples, lectures discuss the various purposes, contexts, and

techniques of the genres. In arts-based writing, the focus is on reviewing, including literary, film, theatre, and music reviews. While the students are more familiar with reading, and occasionally writing, reviews than with organizational writing, this second area still extends their knowledge of genres that are used in varied fields of cultural and industry practice. The final example encourages interest in writing for different media, other than print-based ones. By developing a researched treatment for a short radio documentary script, students can reflect on the differences involved in writing for the ear instead of the eye. In their assessable work, they write in subgenres chosen from at least two of these three main areas, complementing each piece of genre writing with reflections on their experience of applying the rhetorical variables.

Representing diverse contexts, structures, and relations with audiences, these three broad types of writing are not commonly studied together in a humanities course. We do not assume that these are the only, or even the most common, genres that students would use in other work or community contexts. However, by juxtaposing them and inviting students to compare and contrast them, we are able to foreground the role of the rhetorical variables, noted above, in different writing practices. By focusing on the ways in which the variables may be negotiated in diverse situations, we also acknowledge an issue that arises in the teaching of writing, namely, that an opposition is often assumed between "creative writing" and various kinds of professional, organizational or media writing that are seen as being essentially technical or instrumental in nature. Without prescribing how students should deal with this issue in their own writing studies, we invite them to consider the role that creative thinking may play in the different forms of writing as a social activity (c.f., Cain, 2009; Hart & Daughton, 2005; Surma, 2005), which the study of the variables outlined here can help to understand.

It is a straightforward process to introduce, in lectures, the theoretical framework for engaging with the different examples. However, as we use the combination (common in several countries) of a lecture followed by tutorials, successful coverage of the lecture material depends on students' participation in the latter. This brings us to the third factor in our triad.

A Pedagogic Strategy for Relating Theory to Practice: The "Committee-Tutorial"

In order to outline the pedagogic approach, let us recount some of the steps that we took in developing it. To encourage participation in learning, we designed a format of tutorial group work intended to give students the opportunity to apply the theoretical concepts, introduced in lectures, directly to their own work. We combined the structure of tutorials with a form of organizational communication borrowed from the workplace practices being studied, namely, the committee meeting. The meeting model appealed to us for several reasons.

From a theoretical viewpoint, we were interested in the teaching implications of the argument that any strict division, such as is sometimes assumed between academic and organizational or technical writing, begins to break down if it is acknowledged that principles of professional communication (e.g., consideration of purpose, context, and appropriate address) apply across these different areas (Putnis & Petelin, 1999; Windschuttle & Elliott, 1999). Institutionally, these implications can be related to the work environment of academics and students. For some faculty, the committee meeting has connotations of overly bureaucratic communication, as opposed to open scholarly dialogue. Nonetheless, in our academic careers, we have often found that committee processes can be used collegially to support academic activities. Aspects of committee procedure, suitably adapted, can provide a formal structure of working together that helps students to explore course concepts in an applied way. For instance, as mentioned above, the variable nature of authorship, sometimes individual and sometimes collaborative, sometimes both, is a key course concept: in performing committee roles, students engage in collaborative authorship of committee documents (illustrated below), while writing other materials individually in related class preparation and assessment work.

In the planning stages, we were aware of the day-to-day problems of group work and looked for a way to overcome them, especially in a subject asking students to engage with the study of new and possibly challenging forms of writing. Whilst the traditional justification for small-group classes is to help students engage in intellectual dialogue and take responsibility for their own learning (Abercrombie & Terry, 1978; Brookfield & Preskill, 2005; Griffiths, 1999), the success of such classes depends on group dynamics more unpredictably than many staff would like (Gibbs, 1992; Herron, Beedle, & King, 2006; Meyers, Bender, Hill, & Thomas, 2006). The best-made lesson plan may fail because some students remain passive or else monopolize proceedings (c.f., Johnson & Johnson, 1999). These difficulties can demoralise those students who do contribute to the group. We looked to the hybrid class format, the *committee-tutorial*, as a way of overcoming such difficulties by promoting student participation in the direct application of disciplinary concepts.

The pedagogic strategy evolved, then, in an attempt to relate the conceptual framework to an organizational

practice borrowed from other work domains (committee work and communication) and adjusted for the purpose of teaching and learning. As we began to teach the subject, introducing the meeting format, we sought to offer the students a "consistent image" (Lublin, 1987, p. 13) of what was expected of them. Success would depend on whether the students took the project seriously. We, therefore, explained why we considered the approach relevant to the study of writing, their place in a learning community, and their potential careers, and established that they would have opportunities to review the way the group structure was working. A learning conversation between disciplinary ideas and practices studied would not grow, we anticipated, by just transplanting a practice from outside the classroom, as a set of professionally fixed assumptions and procedures, without considering their purpose afresh. And indeed, implementing the committee model involved a process of gradually adjusting the meeting conventions, requiring a heuristic teaching approach. This was evident in the roles that the students undertook, and the use of organizational subgenres, which we now consider in turn.

We chose the roles of chair and secretary to encourage student leadership and provide continuity between meetings. A student chair was needed if responsibility for managing discussion were not to default to the tutor. For the chair, this meant preparing to elicit ideas about assigned materials, invite alternative responses, and bringing into play the resources of all members. The role of secretary was considered necessary to help the chair plan meetings, and record substantive points about materials and organizational matters such as task distribution.

A pre-instructional decision was that these two roles should be filled by different students each week, so that all members would perform at least one of them. For students not acting in these positions on a given day, the role was that of members who would come to the meeting ready to discuss agreed readings, genre examples, and work in progress on writing in the selected forms, as "business," in an informed way. We considered supplementary roles, and did include initially that of a timekeeper, who would liaise with the chair in planning and the secretary in monitoring the meetings. Because of the limited opportunities for the students in these three roles to confer outside class, we did not persist with the timekeeper, and decisions on timing were then left to the chair. However, in contexts where the further consultation out of class could be arranged on a more regular basis, including the timekeeper role could encourage further interaction. The role-set that we have used in tutorials, over time, has led to productive meetings when the group size is about twelve; groups have remained functional, however, even when it has been necessary to increase membership to about twenty. The opportunity to move between the different roles gives students an opportunity to see, from different but related viewpoints, how the contributions of chair, secretary and general members depend on each other. Through committee interactions, students can explore the communication variables in practical ways. So, for instance, they work with genres that entail a form of authorship different from that to which they are accustomed in academic essay-writing, being based on group rather than individual efforts. This learning activity can be illustrated by the adaptation of agendas and minutes.

For established committees in workplace and community contexts, agenda formats tend to be a given. Initially, perhaps staying closer than we realised to more routine tutorial practice, we did not consider that formal agendas would be necessary, since we had set readings and questions in the course materials, for discussion in the meetings. However, the meeting process was foreign to most students, who soon found that they needed more structure. So they moved formally that a written agenda be tabled by the chair at the start of each meeting. The inclusion of agendas in the meetings reflected independent thinking by the students about the nature of an often taken-for-granted organizational genre. In reflecting on their group work at an early stage, they applied the subject work on the rhetorical variables, thinking about the purpose of this type of document, in a changed context. It was agreed to adopt standard agenda features, including *confirmation of minutes* and *business arising* at the beginning, and *other business* at the end, while using the middle part of the agenda flexibly, to include items on the discussion of the set readings and questions. Although not necessarily a standard part of meetings, *apologies* were also included, at the start of tutorials. Students unable to attend a class were expected to submit an apology through a fellow student or the instructor, a communication mechanism that helped to create a routine procedure for accountability. The student-led introduction of agendas gave a more purpose-built structure to meetings, and more guidance to the recording of business. The meeting process, and reflection on it, helped to make small-group teaching responsive to students' contributions to developing the means of learning (c.f., Laurillard, 2002).

In contrast to our initial decision not to use agendas, we had envisaged from the outset that minutes would be a standard part of each meeting, to record both substantive and organizational points. The function of the minutes was consolidated when the agendas were introduced and, in turn, they assisted the preparation of successive agendas. The introduction of agendas, alongside minutes, thus highlighted the inter-relationship of organizational writing genres, which

was something that we had been discussing in lectures–we had been considering, for example, the way in which a discussion paper might lead to a report and, in turn, to a press release. Using agendas and minutes for a new purpose in tutorials showed how they work together as forms of organizational writing. It also gave the students an opportunity to see how such forms of writing can help to manage a collaborative work-program over time. The process of *generic adaptation* that this example represents–modifying professional communication forms for a teaching context–is useful as both a vehicle to advance discipline-based study and a means of giving students a "feel for the game" of institutional practices.

In the meetings, which we have sustained over four years in teaching the subject, students gain valuable experience in new forms of writing and interpretation, combining collaboration with individual judgment, through multiple tasks. Using committee templates, those undertaking the role of secretary have to learn to match minutes with agenda items; record the proposer and seconder of motions; write consistently in the appropriate tense; and use clear, unambiguous language to present information accurately and economically. As chairs, they draft meeting plans, liaise with a secretary, and revise their drafts if necessary. They have to deal with silence on any issue and give guidance during a meeting on the taking of minutes. Although, as noted, we do not have time-keepers, all students have to negotiate time limits as a factor in organizing speech and writing. They need to interpret technical distinctions, such as the difference between business arising and the order of new business. But it is sometimes unforeseen problems that build an appreciation of the skills involved in collaborative writing.

An example comes from an occasion when, because of confusion arising from a course handbook error, the student chair had prepared different material from others in the group. The student vacated the chair in place of the tutor. As a result of the problem, the group members undertook to check the relevant standing orders of the Arts Faculty to see how this process could have been managed formally. It was reported at the next meeting that, in such a situation, the secretary adds to the minutes a note, preferably in italics, of the time when the chair vacated and resumed the position. Other tutorial groups were given the same checking task. The implication of the class-work for understanding professional writing is apparent. The practical scenario made students aware that, although organizational forms are often authored collectively and require writers to work to a template, they also involve a good deal of independent thinking and careful judgement about complex and sometimes unexpected issues.

While the meeting format has thus been adapted to the teaching situation, our context is unlike that of other committees: for instance, students are assessed on their contribution to the classroom learning activities. Personal correction or criticism could make them feel failure as tutorial participants more acutely than if they had not taken on the new roles. The tutors are aware of this, and therefore seek to act as facilitators, overseeing meeting procedure in as low-key a way as possible, to help create an environment for participation, rather than directing the discussion. They circulate material on meeting structure and procedure to all the students, and brief the incoming chair and secretary before meetings, checking that these students understand how they can use the conventions of the agenda and minutes and cooperate in running the tutorial. Organizational errors in chairing or other meeting behaviour, from which the whole group can learn, are addressed as they occur, to keep the discussion on track. Beyond that, the tutors contribute to the discussion of the readings and examples, within the turn-taking protocols of a meeting, or respond to requests that others need them to "field" (for instance, about issues arising from lectures). They also offer feedback to the chair and secretary after the meeting, clarifying any concerns the students have about their roles and the remaining tasks of writing minutes and handing over to the next office-bearers.

The tutorial system provides reassurance about the individual's role in collaborative authorship, showing that, while one can take initiative in problem-solving, not all the difficulties of preparing work for public presentation need to be overcome alone. It indicates how individuals can develop resource networks in professional writing contexts. This becomes evident during the semester, as students can access examples of previous agendas and minutes when they assume the office-bearer roles. It has been reinforced by our introduction of occasional panel discussions during the lecture times, in which several of the university's senior executives have shared their career experiences with the students. These guests have discussed the importance of professional writing forms in academic planning and policy that influence the culture of teaching and learning. Students can see themselves as situated in this culture and, when these events have been arranged, they have used tutorial time to prepare questions to circulate in advance to the panellists, and afterwards have collaborated on letters of thanks.

Through the tutorials and related work, the students can begin to familiarize themselves with the knowledge, relations, techniques, and conducts that comprise a social field or *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977; Grenfell & James, 1998) of professional writing. At the same time, the meeting process marks an attempt to renew the dynamic of tutorials for the purpose of helping students to understand their immediate

academic field, or, to adapt Cromwell's formulation (2005), to find ways in which pedagogy and curriculum content can act together in "systematic approaches to involve students in their discipline" (p. 92). As Riordan (2005) has remarked, the search for such approaches represents a concern with how, in different sites, we can "engage students in the practice of our disciplines so that disciplines become what the word implies–habits of mind that inform student lives in their various contexts and communities" (p. xix). The committee-tutorial is offered as one framework for such engagement, in which students can develop reliable habits of writing, listening, and speaking for participating in a learning community, and experience the collegial conduct of discourse and inquiry that is an important part of understanding a discipline.

Reviewing the Application of Disciplinary Concepts

In evaluating the adaptation of the committee meeting, several traditional methods used in higher education have been employed, including the regular university surveying of student opinion (referred to below as *survey*). An expert peer evaluation was conducted through the University's Teaching and Learning Centre, which is responsible for providing advice to academics (S. Stein, Peer report on teaching observation, UNE, May 26, 2005, referred to as *report*).

Expected Outcomes

The report confirms that the adaptation of professional practice supports disciplinary aims: "The ability to communicate in spoken and written modes through the meeting medium matched the course itself, which was about writing and communicating for work purposes and contexts." As already indicated, matching pedagogy and academic content is not a matter of just copying professional procedures. Rather, meetings contribute to learning because having a choice of formal roles means that individuals can play to their strengths and enhance them. The use of this format favours what has been called the development of *independence strategies* through the application of a particular "knowledge base" in group work (Gibbs, 1992, p. 51), the creation of a space in which students can study communication roles and forms in a flexible way. This is reflected in one student's comment: "I thought this was a great course–well constructed–and it allows for individual creativity" (2005 survey). In fact, although we had originally planned a logic that would deconstruct binaries of academic versus organizational writing, or professional versus creative writing, we did not necessarily foresee that the students would grasp this so readily in practice, as opposed to theory. The report, too, recognizes that the format works to the benefit of the students:

> The organization of the tutorial was clear and, because of this clarity, students were better able to contribute to the content and form of the meeting. The structure of the tutorial was a means to stimulate interaction among the students, as well as with ideas and concepts. The format, used for each tutorial, thereby provided a safe environment: students knew what to expect.

The meeting structure–at some distance from the highly formal end of the spectrum of meeting formats (Eunson, 2008), open to modification, yet providing procedures that created the "safe environment" for contributing–reduces significantly the extent to which participation depend on individuals' shyness, nervousness or tendency to dominate. It lessens the students' anxieties about participating, through its emphasis on collaborative roles, which bring with them technical conventions that facilitate writing and speaking. This is reflected in student responses (2004 survey):

> Tutorials created a friendly learning atmosphere. I was not scared about speaking up and giving my opinion.

> I liked the learning as we go approach, as it was less stressful, and if we made a mistake the whole group learned from it.

On the issue of shifting leadership responsibilities away from instructors, students have also commented that they like having the roles of chair and secretary. We acknowledge the importance of "keeping teachers' voices in balance" (Brookfield & Preskill, p. 192) and finding "a way to teach that is neither too dominant nor too reserved" (p. 214); and the effect that the meeting structure has of devolving attention from the tutors is noted in the report in the following terms:

> The tutor took on the role of participant in the meeting. This placed the focus upon the students, their input and interaction, and took the focus off the tutor. Even the quieter students were active and engaged. The students were taking on responsibility for their own learning.

One student wrote that "to begin with, the meeting style was a little shaky, but once we got into it, we all learned from this new skill" (2004 survey), a comment echoed by others. We plan to include further guidance on meeting procedures for students. While the balance between learning these procedures and the curriculum

content needs continual processing, the following remarks from the first survey (2004) are representative:

> The meeting format wasn't as formal as I first thought and I learned a lot more than I thought I would.
>
> The course taught me skills about meetings that I had never used before, and how to contribute to meetings in the future.

Chairs and secretaries generally prepare well for tutorials, as do most group members. Professionalizing the tutorial means that the minutes are almost always completed on time. Comments from several students, to the effect that they think their experience of the meeting format will help them to apply independently what they have learned, indicate that the committee-tutorial has promoted their interest in transferring knowledge to different situations. In the words of one student, the subject "taught me new things and how to implement variables in my writing and how I can use these in future jobs" (2005 survey).

Unexpected Results

The size of groups, the requirement that each student perform an office-bearer role, and the interest of some students who have been chairs in also gaining practice in minute-taking, mean that sometimes more than one person has taken the minutes for a meeting. These students have then engaged in a mini-workshop out of class, comparing their minutes to generate a single document for the group. Again, the meeting process has allowed students to position themselves differently as writers–taking notes for their own reference but also writing with, and for, others. One student commented that "I learned how to write notes quickly and elaborate on them later and write up my notes for a large group" (2005 survey). Such flexible note-taking is a skill often assumed but rarely modelled or taught, although it is crucial to most, if not all, university study. In writing at one moment for themselves and at another for the group or persons outside it (as in the letter to executives mentioned above), the students have the opportunity to work in different language registers, across informal and formal styles.

As well as focusing on writing and speaking skills, the meetings encourage different ways of listening. Active listening is a core communication skill and is important for writing in organizational and other contexts. It, too, is often assumed in the university context but rarely taught. Providing students with a mode of group learning that not only informs them theoretically but also engages them in managing meetings necessitates their development of active listening skills. Subtly different kinds of listening are required to lead a group discussion, capture essential points for the minutes, or co-write a document. The meeting structure has built-in invitations and spaces for speaking as well as opportunities for providing summaries, and these can help students to integrate thoughts and behaviors, such as listening and note-taking for different purposes, underlining the social and disciplinary complexities of communication.

The committee model has had some further benefits for the students, consolidating their learning resources. The minutes can serve as supplementary revision notes for individual work, indicating which readings can be applied, and in what ways, to assignment questions. Because students decide the agenda from a set of possible activities relating to specific genres each week, the study pathways vary and cater to each group's interests. For staff, too, there have been some practical benefits. The minutes provide a detailed record of what has happened in the tutorials and individuals' contributions. One piece of administrative work, documenting attendance, becomes redundant because attendance, absences, and apologies are minuted, then confirmed the following week. Tutors gain a justifiable way to promote the timely submission of work, for groups accept that minutes need to be drafted in time to aid preparation of the next agenda. The performance of roles and the writing of agendas and minutes give a clear indication of students' efforts, to help determine participation grades, which students generally regard as a fair way of recognizing individual contributions to the group.

The logistical challenges faced in our teaching context would be familiar to many faculty in the arts and humanities. In these disciplines, students are usually expected to devote most of their study time to working outside class. Staffing constraints mean that in-class hours are limited. Some university departments are abandoning small-group teaching because of reduced resources. In our institution, educational uses of new technologies have given rise to a further problem, which may also occur elsewhere. As our off-campus delivery mode has shifted from print-only to web-based distribution of materials, on-campus students may also gain access to extensive on-line resources, or expect to do so. As a result, although there is no policy decision to reduce classes, some on-campus students cut them anyway, assuming rightly or wrongly that the online support is sufficient for success. The committee-tutorial represents one attempt to provide a form of face-to-face, interactive learning that students will find engaging.

Research Implications

From the approach explored through our committee-tutorial example, we can now draw out some implications related to more general research on pedagogy in higher education. The first area of implications concerns the similarities and differences between adaptive application and other pedagogic strategies. The second concerns the possible links between our approach to the teaching of writing and further fields of study.

The methodology that we have outlined has some resemblance to, but also some important differences from, *cooperative learning* as it has been established over recent decades. The basics of cooperative learning have been identified as positive interdependence, individual accountability, interaction that promotes learning, social skills, and processing by the group of how effectively it is working (Johnson & Johnson, 1991; Johnson & Johnson, 1999). Cooperative learning became an influential model of pedagogy in some areas of higher education (at least in the United States) in the late 1980s (Cabrera, Nora, Crissman, Terenzini, Bernal, & Pascarella, 2002; c.f., Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1998). Occasionally, the use of cooperative learning theory has been reported and analyzed specifically in relation to the teaching of writing in the college or university writing classroom (e.g., Nowlin & Amare, 2003) but, more generally, the five basics just mentioned have been applied or refined in a range of college and university contexts (e.g., Kelly & Fetherston, 2008; Millis, 2002; Occhipinti, 2003; Serrano & Pons, 2007; Slusser & Erickson, 2006). Further, cooperative learning has overlapped with uses of other collaborative learning approaches to support varied learning styles associated with differences of gender, ethnicity, socio-economic background, and previous levels of educational achievement, and to promote not only cognitive but also affective, interpersonal and social development, including "increasing tolerance and openness" in changing and culturally diverse educational and social environments (Cabrera et al., 2002, p. 23; c.f., Hennessy & Evans, 2006). The interest in establishing cooperative or collaborative contexts for learning can extend well beyond the "micro" level of the individual subject or classroom, to include wider integration of the curriculum, fostering of learning collaborations between students across different discipline areas (Trigwell, 2005), and community support such as collaborative learning in residence halls (Cabrera et al., p. 21).

The features that our strategy shares with cooperative learning include the organising of group interaction to support learning, and the change in the tutor's role to that of facilitator. To an extent, our approach also shares in the concern with supporting access to learning for students from different backgrounds. So, for instance, by introducing a degree of structural formality based upon equitable contribution, the committee-tutorial has the potential to create a common ground for interaction between students from diverse educational and cultural backgrounds, of different ages, in varied degree courses, and with divergent career interests. This suggests our model's consonance with contemporary educational and social objectives of higher education. However, our illustration of the method relates specifically to a writing subject, not an entire context of support across a curriculum or institution, so we would not expect our writing pedagogy, by itself, to radically influence students' entire cognitive and social development.

Perhaps a more significant distinction is that the approach we have described does not rely on, or seek to foster, emotional and psychological bonding of the kind that, at least for several advocates of cooperative learning, is part and parcel of "positive interdependence" and the interactive learning and benefits associated with it. In the still influential model of cooperative learning represented in Johnson & Johnson (1999), among other works, is an incitation to promote a style of learning through which processes of reasoning become more meaningful when accomplished through affective bonding. In their learning tasks, students are to realize "a shared identity" that "binds members together emotionally," in an experience that "creates a positive cathexis so that group members like each other" (Johnson & Johnson, 1999, p. 79). Panglossian though this may sound in some circumstances, these authors state that the "degree of emotional bonding that exists among students has a profound effect on the quality of work performed" (p. 206), and treat this bonding as a norm for teachers and students to internalise. This affective adventure is seen as promoting the individual's cognitive development, opening up an experience of different, and possibly conflicting, perspectives for a higher "synthesis" of meaning (p. 188), beyond the premature moral and intellectual certainties of "egocentrism" (pp. 64, 212). A teaching structure that permits this development to occur is considered not to impose didactically on students, but to realise their inner potential for emotional maturation, promoting "psychological health" (p. 212).

In contrast, the approach we have presented may seem less ambitious, limited as it is to a discipline-based use of group roles encouraging students to apply rhetorical theory in their own practice and cultivate their writing and related communication skills. But it does provide students with the opportunity to participate actively in forming their own learning environment. In this regard, our approach has

something in common with the use of simulation and role-playing methods to provide what, in a related field, Booth, Colomb, & Williams (2008, p. 278) refer to as a "rhetorical context" that "dramatizes for students" their role as learners and practitioners in study. For Booth et al., the role in question is that of the student as researcher, but the analogy stands for the student as writer, reader, and listener in the writing class. The pedagogic application of rhetoric can support student learning without being made dependent on an assumed cultural capacity and predilection for psychological, affective bonding. Performing the roles in the committee-tutorial, for instance, helps students to familiarise themselves with the skills that enable them to make independent judgments about appropriate uses of genres, styles, and modes of address while working individually or with others for particular purposes, and to understand how this might apply across differentiated contexts. Seeing how the rhetoric of variables applies in pursuing their academic work can help them to recognize that successful organizational as well as academic communication depends on the inventive use of those skills. This recognition can change the idea of academic work, so that it is not viewed as merely facilitated by a somehow oppositional administration. Seeing that an organizational form of writing could be "creative," as one student implies in the feedback quoted above, is a short step from realizing that academics and administrators are perhaps not necessarily so Manichean in their relationship as is often imagined. Students can see themselves not only as preparing for a working ("real") world but in fact as already working, across the complex terrain of the university, in a way not envisaged in the psychological model of cooperative learning.

This brings us to the second research implication, the possible relevance of the approach we have presented here to other areas of study. Without assuming the applicability of a particular approach across "any" subject area, in terms as sweeping as those found in some of the literature on psychologically derived cooperative learning (e.g., Johnson et al., 1998), we can suggest some ways in which the approach of adaptive application in writing pedagogy may help connect student work on writing with adjacent areas of study.

The platform of dialogue between academic concepts of writing and professional practices studied allows a two-way movement. As mentioned previously, the applications discussed above are designed to enhance students' ability to write in forms other than the academic essay that are used in workplaces beyond, yet also within, the university. Studying diverse professional genres can in turn reinforce the skills needed in academic writing, including the ability to clarify discursive purpose, structure, and style. Given this, work in genres other than those that we have mentioned could be nested within the committee-tutorial structure, to meet varied interests. Because of the cross-fertilisation of interests between professional and academic writing, we are considering the inclusion of some specialized forms of *scholarly* writing such as research and grant proposals, abstracts, and literature reviews, acknowledged also as further modes of professional writing, to broaden the skills of those students contemplating postgraduate study. As Harris (2006) argues, such forms can prove difficult, even for students who write academic essays well. What we have been exploring as a professional turn in a humanities-based study of writing can also help students to achieve what Harris calls "cognitive complexity" and deal with the "intricacies" of scholarly writing (pp. 137, 144).

Further, a meeting process that has students thinking reflexively about their role as writers can facilitate the study of diverse genres–such as research reports in sociology, interviewing, journalistic genres, policy writing, or forms of science communication and environmental writing–in other disciplines. Writing skills are a foundation for learning more generally, as has been argued in research on teaching in the social sciences, for example (Althauser & Darnall, 2001; Cadwallader & Scarborough, 1982), and the meeting model could support projects of writing across the curriculum. It is important, however, to recognize that writing forms and techniques vary across disciplines (Anderson & Holt, 1990; McLeod & Maimon, 2000). Academics often underestimate the difficulty that students have with the variations, even in using different style guides and referencing systems. Helping students to approach this kind of difficulty with greater comprehension, the committee-tutorial grounds the development of writing skills for academic and other purposes in an understanding of writing as a situated "social act" (Anderson & Holt, 1990, p. 181), while supporting work in differentiated forms. These skills assist students to find connections between subjects and achieve the "integration of learning" across different study areas that colleagues in many disciplines want their students to possess when they graduate (Engelmann, 2005, p. 48). In promoting these skills, the teaching strategy presented here has broader implications. It assists students to approach *inter*disciplinary or cross borderland terrains without losing sight of disciplines and their specific requirements.

Conclusion

The pedagogic approach that we have called adaptive application can help students to develop the writing skills needed to work in diverse genres. It

entails the adaptation of elements of professional practice, to provide a context in which disciplinary ideas that help to understand the principles and processes of professional writing can be applied and reflected upon, in the immediate environment of the students' own work. The committee-tutorial illustrates this type of adaptation. It supports a program of lectures and guided readings that construct a theoretical framework for analyzing techniques and principles relevant to a range of genres used in diverse cultural and institutional settings. Students can use the group roles to explore the variable nature of writers' roles and the interrelations between specific contexts, purposes, and styles. In this experience, they are encouraged to consider the relations between writing and other activities, including reading, speaking, and listening, together with the elements of creativity and judgment, and the social relations and negotiations, which potentially come into play in different communicative forms and new situations that they may encounter. In a higher education context, adaptive application contributes to the store of available forms of writing pedagogy; and the not-so-odd coupling of the committee-tutorial adds to the repertoire of strategies for managing, and renewing, teaching and learning in the disciplinary study of professional writing.

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