TEACHING STUDENTS HOW TO WRITE:
the literary essay in a learning society?

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Some time ago I attended an Oxford Brookes Staff Development Day advertised as Developing Student Writing. There were representatives from all corners of the HE sector, people from Sussex to Northumbria who taught everything from engineering to philosophy to staff development itself. I recalled no less a figure than John Carey, Merton Professor of English at the other university in town, once attributing the decline in literacy among his undergraduates to the shrinkage of school Latin (he might also have cited oral delivery of essays in the tutorial system); here, in this diverse group, was further proof that academic writing is something which students find difficult in universities and colleges old and new. Not surprisingly, a consensus soon emerged as to what had brought us all to Rewley House for the day. The problem, it appeared Some time ago I attended an Oxford Brookes Staff Development Day advertised as, was them - that unwieldy body of would-be degree supplicants without the first notion of the laws of subordination in grammar or (one inferred from the v Developing Student Writing. There were representatives from all corners of the HE vehemence of some complaints) in the academy at large. They were lacking in any number of basic competences: couldn't do this, were hopeless at that, left verbs disagreeing, clauses dangling, and apostrophes out. We had all come because we didn't have a collective clue what to do about them.

The latter fact might have pre-empted utterance of the former, but it didn't. Eventually someone plucked up courage and intimated that lecturers might be part of the problem, and just as prone as students to washing their hands of it. We penalise students for bad grammar when they may have little concept of what grammar is; we recommend aids to literacy without always evaluating their usefulness or potential drawbacks; we castigate poor proof-reading without always making it clear what it consists of or why it matters. More seriously, as the man in staff development brusquely observed, we often ignore the responsibility to be grammatical in our spoken discourse, forgetting, perhaps, that lecture and seminar notes form the basis of many student essays; he had led a project in his own institution to monitor the classroom discourse of teaching staff, with challenging results for many concerned. Above all, when we do attempt to teach writing our curriculum too often presents the language of the essay as a series of incidental errors to be avoided rather than as a coherent system to be mastered. Course guides which give prominence to stern homilies on the difference between' effect' and' affect' or the wound inflicted on our native tongue by incorrect use of the word 'disinterested' are rather more common than those which offer advice on how construct a paragraph, never mind a pair of complementary paragraphs.

The general anxiety about student writing was symptomatic of broader concerns about the expansion of the sector, but a strong feeling developed during the day that here was a problem which could be addressed with some likelihood of success given the right approach. There ought, in other words, to be an alternative to blaming everything on schools, the vernacular curriculum, and them. Disarmingly, our development day co-ordinator admitted that her very impressive six-volume guide to essay-writing was unlikely to be consulted extensively - it was simply too big. Like many other such publications, it would probably enjoy a long and quiet life in the learning resource sections of libraries up and down the land. Daunting in its scope, its main purpose might well turn out to be that of excusing tutors from teaching writing ("here's a useful book which you might consult..") and students from the ostentatiously formidable effort of learning it. A general improvement in writing skills would evidently require material capable of reconciling two conflicting demands. It would have to be

sufficiently wide-ranging to meet different needs, yet compact enough to be worked through without threatening the autonomy of subject areas. My own inference was that it would also have to require work of the student who consulted it: directed exercises which could accommodate a learner's contributions were more likely to secure improvement than lists of advice and rules.

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Such deductions need cause no surprise, for reasons both contemporary and historical. The North American system of higher education has long been accustomed to dealing with poor writing skills among its entrants. First-year classes in 'rhetoric' at state universities are intended to get students up to speed with some conventions of academic discourse, and act incidentally as a filter for those who may not be able to cope with the broader curriculum. No less than by the imputations of insincerity or inflation which accompany its everyday use, the very word 'rhetoric' has, arguably, been tarnished by association with such institutional strategies. Yet it is important, as students of the Renaissance were often reminded in the 1980s, that rhetoric be promoted as an intellectual opportunity whose scholarly as well as pedagogic potential belies its reputation as the dour gatekeeper of the academy. Here is Alastair Fowler on the paradoxical freedom which rhetoric grants the student:

Far from inhibiting the author, rhetoric is a positive support. It offers room to write in a habitation of mediated definiteness; a proportional neutral space; a matrix by which to order experience during composition...lnstead of a daunting void, it extends a provocatively definite invitation.

The writer is invited to match experience and form in a specific yet undetermined way. Accepting the invitation does not solve all problems of expression, but it does give access to formal ideas as to how a variety of constituents might suitably be combined. Rhetoric also offers a challenge by provoking a free spirit to transcend the limitations of previous examples.[1]

In its adumbration of rhetoric as a building the passage elegantly observes a favoured Renaissance conceit, but one which is no less significant for anyone concerned today with the teaching of writing. Fowler is properly cautious about the limitations of rhetoric, locating the ultimate solution to 'problems' of expression within the author, but his tribute to the 'space' which it offers defines precisely the nature of support which students often require - the knowledge, informed by practice, of what kind of thing they should be attempting, of what room to enter next, of where the pre-existing structures of discourse bid them. Viewed in this way, rhetoric becomes an instrument not simply of expression, but of thought. The last sentence of the passage, moreover, discounts the suggestion that 'rhetoric' in the higher educational sense is merely for those who struggle to meet minimum standards: properly done, it presents a challenge to everyone. Rhetoric, then, should not be simply a way of delivering 'skills', although it will no doubt be necessary in the wake of Dearing for us to demonstrate that we teach it partly in order to achieve that end; it offers a structure within which independent thinking can flourish. Lest there be suspicion of Fowler's humanist co-ordinates, it should be said that he offers scope too for educational advantage of a kind well suited to what now goes on in most departments of English. The process of reflecting on one's own experience of learning academic writing as a discipline proves a useful point o In its adumbration of rhetoric as a building the passage elegantly observes a favoured Renaissance conceit, but one which is no less significant for anyone concerned today with the teaching of writing. Fowler is properly cautious about the limitations of rhetoric, locating the ultimate solution to 'problems' of expression within the author, but his tribute to the 'space' which it

offers defines precisely the nature of support which students often require - the knowledge, informed by practice, of what kind of thing they should f entry into fundamental theoretical questions: the relationship of the individual to the symbolic system of language, the nature and purpose of different linguistic registers, the construction of the reader, and so on.

If history presents a case for the usefulness of rhetoric, it also demonstrates beyond doubt the close alliance between rhetoric and the development of literary studies. For centuries the formal study of literature was the study of rhetoric. Volumes such as Sister Miriam Joseph's Shakespeare's Use of the Arts of Language (1947), Richard A. Lanham's Handlist of Rhetorical Terms (1968), and Brian Vickers's Classical Rhetoric in English Poetry (1970) chart the immense range of expressive devices derived from passages of the ancients which were taught to senior boys in the Renaissance school curriculum, while the teaching of Hugh Blair at Edinburgh University in the 1770s is one influential example of how similar principles could operate with an emerging vernacular canon[2]. However integral to the development of the subject we teach now, such projects may today appear impossibly antiquarian. Readers of Lanham's Handlist, in particular, find themselves admitted less to Fowler's elegant, inviting temple of thought than to some rambling, eerie mansion of bizarre partitions thrown up by a culture's obsession with division, dissection and the naming of obscure parts: hyrmos, pysma, hypozeuxis, effictio and swarms of other tropes buzz round our ears. The very principle of such linguistic classification seems remote, let alone any notion that we might, by finding some instance of it in our own age, recover it to suit current purposes.

Yet instances there are. If the modern origin of them all, Halliday's Introduction to Functional Grammar (1985), imposes itself as awesomely as any Renaissance anatomy of language, its fundamental principle is straightforward and compelling: in its manifold, complex rule structure, language performs signifying functions necessary for the individual's negotiation with the world. The system of language accommodates us because we alone motivate its use; we accommodate it because, in Halliday's disarmingly simple formulation, it 'makes sense' for the jobs we expect of it[3]. The emphasis on signifying functions, the corollary of' which is the documentation of empirically derived language patterns, has spawned work in applied linguistics which, just as the infinite partitions of Renaissance rhetoric placed the practice of writing at the heart of literary study, points to a means of teaching it successfully in today's academy. In a ground-breaking study of discourse in research settings, John Swales traces the development and pragmatics 'of the academic article[4]. He investigates the concept of the discourse community, with its inherent tendency to develop specialised forms of lexis and grammar, and itemises the rhetorical structures of different kinds of academic discourse. Introductions, for example, are described in terms of general moves (establishing a territory, establishing a niche, occupying the niche) and specific steps within them. Attention to overall discursive organisation is combined with analysis of tense and mood markers. The result, although distinctively modern, belongs squarely within the Renaissance anatomy tradition: the paramount Question is always, "What form do I need at this point to signal what meaning?" Most importantly of all, that is a Question which is answered throughout Swales's book at the levels of lexis and syntax as well as of discourse, so offering a method which can in principle handle the incidental irritations of student practice (effect/affect) as well as the broader issues of structure and argument.

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Swales's work is less well known in departments of literature than it might be because its chief application has so far been in training teachers of English for Academic Purposes. Even to consider using EFL-based materials for native-speaker students may constitute an

admission of apocalyptic decline which many will be reluctant to make, but it prompts a perfectly serious point about academic discourse. Anyone who has taught in a continental or far eastern university will have experienced the disturbing sensation of recognizing more accomplished English in the essays of some of their non-native speaker students than in much of the work produced on home soil. It is in the nature of language that there should be good reasons for this, ones which should not occasion further wringing of hands. For a Japanese student of English Literature the system we call essay-writing has to be learned consciously because it is part of a cultural' other'; its distinctiveness is everywhere apparent. The native speaker, on the other hand, faces a more subtle set of obstacles which he or she may never even recognise, still less overcome. Mere possession of the native tongue may breed a false sense of security, particularly in a subject such as English where the individual's reflection - which often appears to students to demand the personal linguistic register they would in any case unself-consciously produce - is still valued. But that is not all. The proverbial rock which assumes that essay- writing is merely an extension of everyday language use has its complementary hard place in the manifold cultural factors which, for individual students, guarantee that it most certainly isn't. The strangeness of academic discourse, in the right circumstances a constructive challenge, may easily be perceived as an instrument of cultural intimidation, designed (as in parts of the American system) to exclude and even to demean.

All of this begs two Questions. How would one go about teaching academic writing to British students as if it were in some sense a foreign language? How, moreover, would one do this in such a way as to involve them in the principles and practice at stake? Any foreign language course worth doing needs, I suggest, to incorporate three fundamental elements which are often missing from attempts to teach writing to native-speaker students: exposure, repetition, and graded learning.

1. Exposure
learners need to be exposed to the target 'language' - i.e. work by other students - if they are to have any idea of what the rules mean in practice. A grammar book which gave no examples would be unusable by anyone except a specialist capable of writing it. Many departments, however, are still reluctant to allow such exposure, viewing it as a breach of privacy. There are, of course, simple ways of protecting the students concerned from any embarrassment about having their work on display, while the pedagogical as well as the psychological benefits for others are immense. There is a delightful moment in Philip Larkin's first novel, Jill, in which the protagonist discovers an essay by his superior public-school room-mate and is amazed to find it very similar in thought to, but slightly less interesting than, his own. To put it solemnly, the moment epitomises the discovery of peer review, in which not only the value of one's work, but of the criteria governing work in general, become apparent.

2. Repetition

All language is, in part, a mechanical exercise which becomes natural to the user only when it is constantly and consciously revisited. To put it rather differently in the terms anticipated above, an apprehension of the alterity of discourse may be a necessary precondition of one's owning it. It is true that students have plenty of opportunities to write essays during their degree courses, but there is rarely sufficient time to focus on specific aspects of written work: the way paragraphs are structured; signalling relationships to secondary sources; ways of registering competing arguments. Specific practice, rather than simply advice, needs to be offered if such important aspects of academic discourse are to be learned; no one would expect to learn another language without practising individual structures and components of it. Such practice, it may be added, usually derives in language courses from specific examples of the target language which the student is invited to repeat, imitate and then use to some different purpose devised by the student - another instance of how the system must be learned

as something out there if it is to be internalised. Damage to the integrity of the subject curriculum need not, as I shall indicate below, be the result.

3. Graded learning
This is a concept taken for granted in language teaching, but which often influences only the formation of essay questions in the department of literature. Teachers of literature are perhaps more keen to defend the essay as the most comprehensive form of assessment than to encourage students to deconstruct its manifold components, whether by analysis or - still less - practical demonstration. Even the best students benefit from being required to produce, for example, only a pair of complementary paragraphs on a given topic, an exercise which, as we shall see, can form a small proportion of first- year assessment or simply slot unassessed into a taught session. For those less accomplished, the exercise proves beneficial not merely stylistically, but in terms of their expectations of the kind of thing they should be thinking during the next sentence or two. In concert with other such exercises, more of which are illustrated below, it builds confidence for the greater challenges of extended discourse.

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Ask a group of subject specialists whether they would welcome a foundation study skills course in their institution and the answer may well be 'no'; ask the same group about the literacy problems students experience in their disciplines and the answers will be remarkably similar. There is clearly scope, given the extent of anxiety about student literacy, for a common core approach to writing skills which does not swamp the curriculum. Equally, an immense opportunity is lost if we go no further than that. What follows is a description of my own attempt to offer both. First, however, a caveat. There is no single approach to the learning of writing which can claim success among all who adopt it, nor one which slots without murmur into the broader curriculum. The work described here has been subject to common difficulties: access by those who most need it; delivery alongside core content; coping with a variety of needs and attitudes among those who use it. If it cannot be called an unqualified success, it has demonstrated two important qualities: relevance to the situation of students across the ability range, and the flexibility to be useful in the different roles accorded it and corresponding demands made of it. It has been taught piecemeal as part of a pair of mandatory modules; recommended as an independent study guide; used to support an occasional programme of surgeries for students who know they are struggling; set as mandatory work for visiting EAP students. Some students have even been known to pull copies off the shelf without encouragement. Curiously (or perhaps inevitably, given the usual institutional constraints), it has not yet been assigned to the purpose for which it looks most obviously designed: that of providing a complete mini-course in writing skills. Only when that happens can its effectiveness be judged adequately.

The core section of the work tackles a range of generic skills which are developed and inflected in later, subject- specific sections. Students are given brief passages of general interest to read, sometimes in a mixture of successful and scrambled versions - most of us have learned to write by assimilating what we read, and it is a major aim of my approach to show students how they can read for rhetorical function as well as content. There follows a series of exercises for each passage, divided into three categories. In functions, students practise defining, in Swales's terms, the 'moves' or 'steps' which paragraphs and sentences are performing, so familiarising them with simple logical conventions embedded in academic discourse. Vocabulary and grammar requires students to pick out particular words or sentence structures in the passage and imitate or find a different context for them. The assumption of this kind of exercise is that one cannot possibly hope, contrary to the anguished compilers of faux amis, to prevent errors by comprehensively listing them; instead, vulnerable fields must

be identified and students' general awareness raised. Finally, in writing to format, the student is given first a set of notes to write up in the form observed by the original passage, and then invited to match a topic of his or her own to the same format. The latter has proved especially useful as a teaching tool in classes not specifically devoted to writing. For the purposes of the core section, the exercises outlined above are based on passages which conform to two very common discursive patterns: problem/solution types and claim/counter-claim types. Students thereby appreciate the dependence of rhetorical convention on the field of intent, it being a crucial test of any functional approach that learners are alerted as early as possible to the idea that different structures exist for different purposes, and so avoid a merely mechanical application of rules. The priority at this stage is to allow students to produce brief spans of written discourse which are internally coherent; with the exception of the final 'writing to format' exercise, there is no pressure to come up with original ideas. When that stage is reached, students are already aware of what their next move should be, at least in principle.

Next there is a chapter devoted to brief essays, in which considerations of overall shaping and development are introduced. In the spirit of early rhetorical treatises (or, for that matter, Edward de Bono), I have chosen entirely hypothetical topics in order to focus attention on form. Examples of writing are given students to work on in the same way as outlined above. A brief essay of six or seven paragraphs has to be written up to format from notes, followed by one of the student's own devising. The rhetoric of introductions and conclusions is dealt with in terms sufficiently general not to pre-empt any of the considerable differences which emerge between disciplines in the subject-specific sections. Students also learn how to insert the complementary paragraphs they have written in the earlier chapters into a larger structure.

The work on brief essays is supported and extended by a chapter on summaries, which returns to the question of reading for rhetoric as well as content. Students compare three summaries of a passage and then complete exercises on different aspects of it: topic sentences, citing and weighing up alternative opinions, signalling the relationships between paragraphs, and so on. They complete their own summary of a given passage at the end of the chapter, and are encouraged to compare versions with their peers, operating the same criteria which were developed during the chapter. The core section of the book ends with chapters on referencing and proof-reading, again with the emphasis on practical tasks

It should be stressed that although all of the above constitutes a core of competences which can be used with students from any discipline, the exercises themselves, if matched to appropriate extracts, can be used to deliver subject content as well - an option preferred by colleagues concerned that their own curricula might be undermined by the forty to fifty hours of independent study time required to work through the core element. It was always intended, however, that the subject-based sections which follow would carry the burden of matching exercises to specific needs. A crucial aspect of such subject-based provision, nonetheless, is that students are encouraged to range beyond their own area - a necessity in many courses and modular schemes where a named degree may cover two subjects, each with distinct discursive conventions, but also a valuable exercise in learning to appreciate the reasons for (and resilience of) such conventions in anyone subject.

Each subject section is structured in the same way to facilitate comparison. Students begin with a marking exercise: they are given three or four essays of pass standard, from the top of the mark range to the bottom, together with a set of marking criteria, and invited to put a mark to each one. After discussion of their findings with their peers, there, is a set of reading and writing exercises organised as follows:

- introductions
- paragraphing and continuity use of sources
- conclusions
- answering the question

In each case, the aim is to prescribe where that is helpful (offering, for example, two different structures for a mid- essay paragraph), but also to emphasize the student's own responsibility to observe, imitate and refine structures. There is the opportunity to improve upon faulty practice in the lower-graded work, to evaluate passages which succeed for different reasons, and to compare practice across different disciplines. In 'answering the question' students are given different kinds of title to consider, a 'key word' exercise, and the chance to reconstruct the plan of one of the essays they have read. This can then be used as the template for an essay plan of the student's own devising, with the opportunity to reconsider the effectiveness of the plan originally derived. By the end of the section, the student has completed exercises in all the major components of an essay, and has a bank of practical experience for future reference.

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A writing textbook which draws on samples of discourse from different disciplines is bound to be more than just a set of exercises. It also makes claims about the characteristics of those disciplines, even about the demands which they make. Such claims are, of course, contingent upon complex questions of sampling, levels of attainment, institutional identity and practice, and so on, but it seems worthwhile to offer here some remarks about rhetorical variation across humanities subjects, even though they may only confirm what has been suspected for many years. The timeliness of the exercise is obvious: since 'transparency' is one of the names of the current higher education game, we might as well be clear about what our students actually produce when we assess them.

To undertake such a comparison is to step - albeit temporarily - into the shoes of those in the academy and beyond who are suspicious of what goes on in departments of English, for in many ways the literary essay is distinctive as much for what it does not do as for what it does. English students are of all the groups analysed the least likely to produce a common overall structure; whereas in Business Studies, for example, there is a consistent game plan of introduction - topic analysis - problem definition/solution - significance definition (conclusion), the architecture of the English studies essay is, although not the eerie, rambling house of Renaissance rhetoric, impossible to define in the abstract. One symptom of this is that English students are also the least given to ostensive signalling of argumentative moves and strategies, unlike student historians, who anticipate everything as fully as possible, laying out the parameters of the question straight away and referring back to them explicitly throughout the essay (one suspects that the New Historicist fad for kicking off an article with an anecdote may have recommended innuendo as an opening strategy for the literature student). Such explicit gate-keeping, as one might expect, also produces a more determinate approach to conclusions is evident in the literary essay, where a variety of indirect strategies may be employed. What is true of discursive structure is also true of syntax: historians and sociologists are more likely to distribute discourse functions across sentences, and signal them emphatically as such, where literature students prefer to embed them in complex patterns of subordination. Lexically, too, the English student operates with relative discretion, devoting less time to overt conceptual definition than her or his peers in the humanities - surprising, perhaps, when the number of concepts available has grown exponentially. Such observations tempt one to conclude that the poetics of classical humanism may be dead as a critical method, yet alive and kicking as a stylistic presumption: impatience with binding concepts may be bought from the certainty that our own discipline nothing affirmeth and therefore never lieth, while the unostensive glory of the literary essay erases obtrusive rhetorical

markers with the Horatian art of concealing art. This might, incidentally, appear to present problems for the rhetorical approach outlined above, but it need not: it is simply a question of identifying correctly the conventions which obtain in different subjects.

What I have called 'explicit gate-keeping' is not alone a matter of discursive strategy, but of subject definition. The types of assignments given to students in History, Sociology and Business Studies all seem preoccupied in a way transparent to non-specialists with what it means to do the subject concerned, and that preoccupation is evident in work at both ends of the marking scale. In History and Sociology a dialectic of concept definition and empirical evidence informs everything in a grand, subject- policing narrative, subsuming theoretical difference. The well-documented fragmentation of English Studies (an intellectual flag of convenience if ever there was one) makes it unsurprising that any such narrative should not only be absent from essays in it, but quite often, it seems, debarred on principle. What is left, often, is the narrative of the person writing. Although English may no longer prize the personal interpretation as it once did, it remains, whether in the teeth of 'theory' or because of it, a strikingly individualistic discipline. English students are on the basis of my sampling more likely than any others to signal the distance of their own positions from a received view, and even to quote secondary material simply to generate a little friction. They are more inclined to undermine the known by reference to the knower, and in the best work to explore the significance of the process: categories of 'subjective' and 'objective' which inform the marking regimes of many other fields are unsustainable here. Very often the relative syntactic complexity and conceptual fluidity of the English essay derive from an implicit signalling' - with whatever degree of success - of the unsustainable nature of that binarism within their discipline. There is also less homogeneity in the selection of primary evidence, because the cornucopic literary text offers so many points of entry; in other disciplines, a given document appears to acquire a number of agreed cruces for which the student is obliged to account. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the individuality of the literary essay is a function of its still inalienable engagement with literary texts, on whose lack of determinate truth value the dialectic of critical work may be predicated, and whose seductive hailings prompt their student-readers to ever greater self-consciousness.

It is easy to represent a discipline whose operations are so described as lacking in public utility, particularly in the wake of recent debate. The enhanced scepticism and partial introversion of the literary essay, whose interlocutor may appear to be as much its author as its reader, do not immediately savour of 'transparency', still less of 'transferability'. Colleagues in what are sometimes called cognate disciplines may be the most suspicious. "The historian's craft," rails Professor John MacKenzie, "is blessed with a certain degree of public interest"; by contrast, a literary academy led by "discourse theorists" promotes an "arcane cabalism", an "esoteric argot", an "invented language embroidered in lengthy sentences of great opacity."[5] If MacKenzie's preference for "the simplest of language" might cause him to dismiss as arcane cabalism any suggestion of a subliminal reference to graduate capability in his phrase, "a certain degree of public interest", the insinuation of superior utility can hardly be disowned. It is a challenge worth taking up: not by the obvious if satisfying means of research into the career destinations and prospects of English and History graduates, which indicates a picture so different from MacKenzie's as to be its opposite, but by reflection on the nature of the" public interest" which our ostensibly amorphous, elusive, introverted literary essay really exhibits. That, I suggest, is a function of that superficial lack of self-definition which appears to make English vulnerable to talk of transparency and transferability.

If the practices of English are easier to define by what they are not than by what they are, the subject as we teach it today has evolved by a correspondingly inverse process, for its apparent fragmentation has in one respect had the reverse of the iconoclastic effect on it predicted in the seventies and eighties. If anything, whatever claim it had in the Leavisite tradition to be the 'super-discipline' of the humanities has been strengthened - or, depending on your point of

view, inflated - by enhanced exchange with psychoanalysis, historiography, philosophy, linguistics, law, medicine, and so on. Such exchange is scarcely new, of course. The confidence of 'Cambridge English' was founded on the cross-disciplinary Tripos, which (as Leavis himself approached its teaching) favoured not simply the adoption of different disciplinary modes, but evaluation of their premises and methods. Today, commerce is so brisk that it has become second nature for the literature specialist to at least attempt to identify, contextualise and deconstruct the claims made by other disciplines while gleefully appropriating elements of them. For colleagues in the disciplines concerned, the professionalism we claim for ourselves by virtue of such activity may seem a symptom of disciplinary crisis, entrenched amateurism, or intellectual intrusion (one wonders whether Professor MacKenzie is so cross partly because he suspects that the re-historicization of English Studies has contributed to the national decline in recruitment to History courses). Yet there has never been a professional code which can subsume an individual's engagement with and articulation of the object of literary study - only a range of procedures to be scrutinised, discarded or synthesised in the face of the texts in question. This is not what we call amateurism, but learning; not a retreat from knowledge, but a painstaking endeavour to evaluate and thereby shape it. "Where there is much desire to learn", wrote Milton, "there of necessity will be much arguing, much writing, many opinions; for opinion in good men is but knowledge in the making."[6] If the phrase "good men" begs sufficient questions to block an easy appropriation of the passage to what is at issue here, the causal chain it draws is attractive. A real desire to learn must produce - and by implication embrace - abundant contrariety, while the individual engagement signalled by 'opinion' is a condition of knowing, not a substitute for it. Viewed in this light, our cuckoo-like discourse of enhanced scepticism and partial introversion begins to look less like a travesty of knowledge and learning than a paradigm of what it means to learn and know. A new breed of 'learning managers' may clamour for modes of assessment which devolve achievement from product to process, but the chief mode of assessment in English, precisely by virtue of its (to some) mysterious ways, already incorporates both.

Milton's defence of "much arguing, much writing, many opinions" observed a national interest: "pens and heads there sitting by their studious lamps, musing, searching, revolving new notions and ideas", as well as simply "reading, trying all things", were instruments of communal renewal[7]. It is not sentimental to demand that 'learning' as it is kicked around in official policy documents today measure up to the scope Milton envisaged for a radically empowered democracy, but nor is it sensible to deny that what we now teach and assess can be made to satisfy even the crudest interpretation of the generic attributes which figure prominently in the new discourse of learning. The literary essay and the terms outlined here for teaching it are not primarily an exercise in developing 'skills', although it is easy to name any number which arise from any principled endeavour to teach it. Of far greater importance is the space devoted to developing qualities which could not be fostered were it less provisional, unpredictable, prone to self-doubt, or individual. The success of English graduates in the employment market - of an extent surprising to many outside the discipline - is a reflection of the adaptability and autonomy they gain from their studies as well as of specific competences such as communicative ability[8]. In many respects English is and has always been ahead of the latest game in higher education: to an extent hard to imagine elsewhere, it is historically located in the body of people who practise it, in their capacity for creative, motivated reflection on personal engagement. The "degree of public interest" which our students cultivate and which we confer on them after informed production of essay work is in the amplest sense of the term one of self-realization.

David Roberts's The Students' Guide to Writing Essays is published by Kogan Page at £8.99.

1. Alastair Fowler, Kinds of Literature (Oxford University Press, 1982), p.44
2. See Gerald Graff, Professing Literature: An Institutional History (Chicago University

Press, 1987), and Bernard Bergonzi, Exploding English (Oxford University Press, 1990)

3. M.A.K. Halliday, An Introduction to Functional Grammar (Arnold, 1985), p.xviii

4. John Swales, Genre Analysis (Cambridge University Press, 1990)

5. John M. MacKenzie, Orientalism. History, theory and the arts (MUP, 1995) p.39

6. From his Areopagitica, in CA. Patrides, ed., John Milton. Selected Prose (Penguin, 1974), p.237

7. Ibid., p.237

See What Do Graduates Do? (UCAS/CSU, 1997); for discussion, see David Roberts and Margaret Clewett, Careers Using English
(Kogan Page, 1997)