Using telephone teaching to ‘scaffold’ students into academic literacy in the
Open University’s Openings Programme

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Abstract
This paper reports on the research design and directions for analysis emerging from a study of the academic literacy experiences of students and tutors on two courses in the Openings Programme. Openings is an access programme launched by the Open University in 2000 which uses disciplinary or interdisciplinary short courses to introduce students to the experience of higher education study. The project investigates six tutors on a social sciences and an arts course working with approximately 25 students. Students’ comfort with academic discourse—and the implicit or explicit ways in which academic literacy is taught—are proposed as keys to retaining ‘non-traditional’ students in higher education.

Introduction
With education policy in the United Kingdom currently focusing on increasing participation and widening access to further and higher education (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997; Kennedy, 1997; DfEE, 1998a), the government target that 50 percent of 18-to-30-year olds have the opportunity to benefit from higher education by the year 2010 (DfEE, 1998b) is by now very familiar. While widening participation initiatives are aimed at recruiting ‘non-traditional’ students, the key to maintaining student numbers lies in retention efforts. Indeed, shifting the focus from recruitment to retention is crucial to delivering on the
promise of widening participation. Successful retention efforts must take into account the aspects of academic culture that may act as barriers to different types of newly recruited students. One key aspect is academic discourse, that is, the types of communication that have evolved in educational settings and incorporate the norms, values and conventions of those who constitute the academic community.

Proficiency in academic literacy—the specialised forms of reading and writing that occur at university—is fundamental to students’ success in further and higher education, as academic reading and writing are key means of learning and assessment (Coffin et al., 2003). Students’ first language may not be English—or standard English—and they may have had experiences with literacy that differ from the expectations of the academy (Rose, 1985; Sternglass, 1997). Students need to know not only academic language but also how to meet the academic communications expectations in different disciplines. In contrast with common understandings about what it means to learn to speak, read, and write in academic language, developing academic literacy is a much more complex and deep-seated process than simply learning ‘correct’ grammar, spelling and punctuation. Rather, it involves entering new linguistic and academic communities, which touches upon key issues of students’ identities and roles in work, study, and life (Lillis, 1997; 2001).

‘Traditional’ students whose backgrounds may have prepared them for the demands of higher education are likely to have learned academic discourse through ‘osmosis, through exposure to the informally constituted community of scholars, academics, and their books’ (Malcolm, 2000, p. 19)—as Lesley,¹ one of the tutors in our study, notes:

¹ A pseudonym, as are the names of all the study participants mentioned.
I never really learned, even at university, my first degree, I didn’t learn study skills. Such as I had, was just picked up. Essay writing, well, we wrote essays constantly. I mean we had several every week to write in school and all the way through university. But I never ever knew how to write an essay. It had never been laid out that this is what an essay should be like. Presumably one did it appropriately, because one got through it, and I jumped through the necessary hoops.

With the goal of understanding how students learn to ‘jump through the necessary hoops’, we have begun a project investigating the academic literacy experiences of 26 students on two courses in Openings, the Open University’s access programme. This paper describes the research design and preliminary findings of the study. Since March 2000 more than 10,000 students have taken Openings courses, with 6795 students going on to Level 1 courses (Sutton, 2003). Openings students subsequently complete more assignments, score higher marks and persist longer in Level 1 courses than students who have not taken Openings courses (Sutton, 2002).

Openings comprises four disciplinary or interdisciplinary courses using first-year level material and incorporating a ‘skills’ component. We are investigating a social sciences course, Y001 Living in a Changing World, and a humanities course, Y002 Living Arts. Openings courses last 14 weeks, although students can take up to 20 weeks to complete assignments. With no face-to-face tutorials, teaching contact takes place entirely by telephone tutorials that last between 20 and 40 minutes. As far as we know, the telephonic nature of Openings tuition is unique among UK access

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2 This project has been supported by a grant of HEFCE monies from the Open University’s Centre for Widening Participation.
3 We could not recruit tutors on Y003, ‘Breakthrough to Maths, Science, and Technology’, for reasons we plan to explore.
programmes, making it attractive to students who have difficulty travelling. Students and tutors negotiate dates for tutorials and deadlines for assignments, the first three of which are ungraded. The fourth, optional, assignment can earn students 10 points. On the first three assignments, however, students are assessed against Learning Outcomes, such as these from Y001:

1. You have demonstrated an understanding of ‘community’ or ‘relationships’, as presented in the Living in a Changing Society course materials.
2. You have produced an answer which is relevant to the essay questions.
3. You have communicated effectively in writing.
4. You have improved your own learning (including organising your studies, responding to feedback and reviewing your own progress).

(Y001 Assignment Booklet, p. 4)

These Learning Outcomes demonstrate the range of aspects related to student activity and student identity with which Openings is concerned: disciplinary content, academic communication; and students developing self-awareness about their acquisition of particular academic and personal attributes.

**Research Questions**

In the overall project, we are investigating these questions:

1. What are the relationships and influences between students’ linguistic backgrounds and their experiences in academic literacy on Openings courses?

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4 Although similar programmes are offered at Glasgow College of Building and Printing, Glasgow and
2. How do students grapple with the academic reading demands of university-level curriculum materials, and how do they enter into the specific literacies of the disciplines?

3. How do Openings courses and tutors explicitly aim to teach the conventions of academic writing and do these approaches bear fruit in students’ assignments?

4. How does ‘scaffolding’—the incremental support of learners by tutors to guide students into academic literacy (Bruner, 1978; Wells, 1996)—take place on Openings courses—or not?

5. What particular role can telephonic communication play in supporting students into academic literacy?

Because we have began data collection and analysis in March, we will here simply present the research design and discuss emerging key themes and directions for further analysis.

Participants: tutors and students

Tutor participants. The six tutors (four women and two men) are experienced lecturers. All have previously taught on Openings; most have other higher education teaching experience. Some are particularly interested in the experiences of working-class students; two did their first degrees with the Open University, and others have taken OU courses.

A central aspect of the research entails involving tutors as co-researchers of their own practice as well as interviewers of each other and each other’s students. Not only does telephone teaching necessitate the intimate involvement of the tutors for gathering data, but equally importantly the tutors are in a unique position to contribute

Stevenson College, Edinburgh, Openings appears to be the only programme that relies entirely on the telephone.
a rich understanding of the ways in which students grapple with academic literacy. Thus embedded within the larger research project is the opportunity for tutors to reflect on their own practice by attending three day-long meetings and participating in an electronic discussion group. While encouraging tutors to contribute to the research may create tensions between their roles as participant tutors as well as investigators of their own practice, we see tutors reflecting on their practice as a worthy goal. Engaging in the process of reflective participatory research contributes to tutors' professional development and simultaneously enhances their teaching (Coats and Tait, 2000; 2001a; 2001b).

Student participants. Of the 26 students, 22 are women and 3 are men. As we have not yet conducted interviews we do not have more information about the students. In terms of Openings students overall, however, on average 72 percent are female and 28 percent male. Mature students (aged 25 or over) constitute the majority of Openings students (84.6 percent), with only 3.9 percent of students aged 21 and under (Sutton, 2003). Of those who declare their ethnic background, 4.1 percent of students come from ethnic/racial minorities. In terms of previous educational achievement, 63.7 percent of Openings students have 'low' or 'lowish' levels.5

Data Collection

We are collecting data in the following ways during one presentation of Openings:

- **Audio taped tutor-student phone calls.** The programme allocates tutors two hours of telephone contact per student during the course. We have supplied tutors with

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5 ‘Low’ levels of previous educational qualifications are set at: no formal educational qualifications or CSE (other than Grade 1), RSA or School Leaving Certificate; ‘lowish’ levels indicate CSE Grade 1, GCE ‘O’ level, SCE ‘O’ level, GCSE, School Certificate or equivalent, BEC general certificate or diploma, in one to five subjects or GCSE ‘A’ level, SCE ‘H’ grade, Higher School Leaving Certificate or equivalent in one subject.
audiotape recorders and phone attachments to record tutorials with consenting students.

- **Interviews with tutors** to learn about their literacy histories, teaching backgrounds and philosophies, and ideas and concerns about their teaching. Tutors conducted interviews with other on the first tutor days and will interview each other again.

- **Interviews with students** conducted by the tutors and researchers. Tutors will conduct interviews with each other's students to avoid putting their own students under pressure. Students will be interviewed after they have received their first marked assignments, and again toward the end of the course.

- **Students’ written work and tutor feedback.** We are collecting the students' formal assignments as well as their unmarked Learning Plans. These plans are the first texts students write, reflective pieces exploring their reasons for taking the course, personal goals, and concerns. We are also collecting the forms that accompany student work, which carry tutors’ comments in relation to the Learning Outcomes.

- **Published course materials,** supplementary instructional and support materials for students and tutors. These include ‘teaching texts’, that is, student books written by OU lecturers, videotapes, audiotapes, and assignment booklets.

- **Tutors’ participation** in three day-long meetings (audio-taped) and contributions to an electronic discussion list.

By collecting this extensive range of different types of data, we will be able to triangulate the experiences of students and tutors, for example, by analysing the student texts and tutor feedback that result from the telephone tutorials before an assignment is due, and by interviewing students and tutors about the experience.
Data analysis

In sifting through this data, we will focus on how tutors, over the telephone and in written comments, attempt to mediate among the student, curriculum materials, and written assignments in order to help students produce successful academic texts. Interviews and recorded phone tutorials are being transcribed. Text and ‘talk’ data will be analysed by seeking key themes in transcripts and texts, focusing on:

- language issues related to academic literacy-- in curriculum materials, student and tutor texts, and phone tutorials--such as the relative informality of the style of student books compared with the more formal style expected in students’ assignments
- relationships between reading and writing, including, for example, how students are directed to incorporate textual evidence into their assignments
- disciplinary aspects of academic literacy, such as how students are taught the particular vocabularies, for instance, of music and poetry in Living Arts
- the nature of telephonic communication--how the telephone affords tutors and students space for dialogue or constrains it.

Emerging Directions

Based on a preliminary analysis of a tutor discussion of issues in their teaching practice, literacy history interviews, audio-taped tutorials, and curriculum materials, the following directions have emerged.

- *Teaching and learning by telephone:* Tutors highlighted positive aspects of teaching by telephone, including the view that it is ‘benign’ and ‘easier than face-to-face’ teaching. One tutor saw Openings as providing more individual
support than other course formats allow. Telephone tutorials need to be planned carefully, however; Edward noted that while the first tutorial is easy, the second is more difficult as the tutor doesn’t know how much of the material the student has covered. The one-to-one format means more individual attention for students, as well as more pressure on them to be active learners. The potential discomfort that the one-to-one focus might cause students may be mitigated by the telephone, as Lesley notes, as it ‘creates a degree of distance, so there is not so much possible embarrassment’.

Negative aspects of using the telephone included the repetitive nature of one-to-one teaching. Also, as students may phone tutors at home, they sometimes interrupt tutors’ activities. Spending up to 40 minutes on the telephone with a student can be exhausting, but most tutors mentioned spending much more than two hours overall with students.

- **Student attributes.** Tutors repeatedly raised the issue of students’ confidence levels to undertake university-level work, and described part of the tutors’ role as helping students develop reduce their anxiety about their performance. Related aspects were students’ levels of motivation and interest in the topic areas. Tutors also mentioned that students whose oral communication seems strong and confident do not necessarily produce strong written texts.

- **Scaffolding into academic discourse.** Some tutors consciously try to ‘scaffold’ students from daily spoken language into using academic discourse. Edward proposed that ‘one of the things we should be trying to do [is] trying to ease that passage from oral fluency to written’. His approach is to, ‘start off very informally, sort of ordinary discourse and move towards academic discourse slowly and incrementally.’ Frank concurred: ‘introduce bits of academic
jargon and talk to them about [it] slowly’. This task requires a certain level of self-monitoring, as Anne noted: ‘One of the things I have to be really careful about when I am talking to the students on the telephone is my own vocabulary.’ By examining tutorial transcripts we are identifying models of good practice, places where communication breaks down, and examples of productive and unproductive conversational exchanges.

- **Issues in student writing.** Tutors pinpointed some areas within student texts that seemed incongruent with academic discourse. Anne noted, ‘I find even with students that can write a bit more easily is that they are very much stuck into a narrative mode . . . They can tell a story or a poem or whatever it is they have been studying on my course but ask them to analyse it and that is a lot more difficult’.

- **Feedback.** Tutors are concerned about how to provide understandable, useful written feedback on student assignments. Anne mentioned ‘being careful also how you express things on your [assignments] as well because I know sometimes I have written things down and the students haven’t understood them.’ Valerie agreed: ‘I try and think of different ways to get things over, rather than using the sort of things that you get on a child’s school report, “You could do better,” this sort of stuff’. Lesley said, ‘Something one thinks about all the time, particularly in the feedback that you give students . . . is how to help them get to grips with the feedback you give them’.

**Conclusion**

As noted, our study is still in the early stages. Since important issues for further analysis have emerged, we anticipate developing rich findings, which will be fed back
to the university with the goal of improving practice not only in teaching, but also in the development of curriculum. We anticipate, for example, recommending a more explicit focus within curriculum and teaching materials on developing students’ meta-level awareness of aspects of academic discourse. We hope that these recommendations will contribute to the retention of students in higher education.

References


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