

Sally Mitchell from the Writing in the Disciplines project at Queen Mary, University of London. Text of a speech about her involvement in the project and the background to her interest in the subject.

I want to mention my own background because I think this helps to give some grounding to what we're trying to do at Queen Mary. I've spent a number of years – at Hull and subsequently Middlesex Universities – conducting research into the way argument is taught and learnt in both sixth form and higher education and in trying to work out ways of improving this. As part of this work I spent a good deal of time just observing what went on in classes across the disciplines – how tutors and students interacted, the tools they used for getting learning done, the way learning was assessed and how the participants felt about all this. I observed that writing was used largely as the form for summative assessment; that feedback was varied, often rather abstract, rarely leading to revision and resubmission; that the predominant form – at least in the arts and humanities was the essay; that, although this was a form intended to be used for argument, it was often used rather safely, to record the knowledge of others rather than register critical positions; that questions and queries raised in speech often did not make their way in the written form, and, on the other hand, that spoken situations could be teacher-dominated, non participatory. It also became clear that the complex package of skills required to write effectively in an academic discipline was expected to be acquired rather crudely either in the spoken seminar situation or in the practice of writing actual essays, and then nebulously in the spaces in between, when the student – what? listens in lectures, goes to the library, thinks in some way or another. There was a kind of gulf between the occasion of input and the formal output. Writing was also a very individualistic mode – not collaborative in the process, and, as a product, not shared with a readership wider than one or two.

I concluded that writing was probably under-exploited in learning – used as a vehicle for the expression of finished thought – a final form, signifying closure for students. Correspondingly speech was sometimes overused – assumed to be the best way of generating ideas in class etc. Writing could be used for the process of learning for more, it seemed to me. Why wasn't it being used as a place to explore thinking, to develop questions, to reflect, to manipulate information in different ways? And why was there so little writing in a clear rhetorical context (as there is more obviously in speech), where the purpose of a communication was apparent and not clouded by the ambiguity of role and purpose of the essay form?

I also came to believe that the key to improvement in writing and learning would not lie in the provision of add-on skills courses or in a remedial approach, which signalled out certain students for special attention but left the mainstream educational process unchanged. My focus on 'argument' told me that you had to learn to do stuff like argument and also writing within the context of the discipline's ways of doing. Linked so closely to thinking and knowing in particular ways, argument development was not the responsibility of support staff but of mainstream disciplinary staff. These were the people

skilled at arguing within their disciplines. That didn't mean though that these people necessarily had effective ways of making this clear to students or of turning what they knew into challenging learning experiences.

So you couldn't just expect changes to take place in teaching and learning practices – there had to be opportunities for staff development, occasions where staff could share their ideas and practices with others, good collegial support and, ideally, institutional backing. All these factors we have tried to put into place through the Writing in the Disciplines project at Queen Mary.

(The observations made here derive from educational studies I've been involved with over the last 10 years. See, for instance:

Mitchell, S. (1994) *The Teaching and Learning of Argument in Sixth Forms and Higher Education: Final Report*, Centre for Studies in Rhetoric, University of Hull.

Mitchell S. & Riddle, M. (2000) *Improving the Quality of Argument in Higher Education: Final Report*, School of Lifelong Learning and Education, Middlesex University.

Andrews, R & Mitchell S (2001) *Essays in Argument*, London: Middlesex University Press.)