Paradigm and pedagogy: Transitional issues in English

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Abstract

This article considers interview and questionnaire data collected in a large-scale study of students of English making the transition between sixth form and university and their teachers at both post-16 and university levels. Drawing on philosophical perspectives derived from Pierre Bourdieu, it discusses a set of issues surrounding curricular formations of English at post-16 and higher education levels in the United Kingdom (UK) context. It identifies how curricular formations impact upon students' experiences and conceptualisations of subject, notions of pedagogy, and the relationship between students and teaching staff at the point of transition.

Keywords: pedagogy, English literature, transition, student experience, curriculum

Introduction

Students making the transition between sixth form and university English face a number of areas of difficulty. The demands of moving from one institution to another and coming to terms with a new set of cognitive and metacognitive demands (Marland, 2003), teaching practices (Ballinger, 2003; Green, 2005a), study patterns (Stewart & McCormack, 1997), levels of independence (Smith, 2003; Smith, 2004), assumptions (Clerehan, 2003), expectations and assessment procedures (Cook & Leckey, 1999; Booth, 1997) are complex. For this reason it is vital that serious attention be given to the experience of students moving into higher education from a variety of institutional and academic backgrounds. It is also vital to consider how they manage the experience of change and why they either succeed or fail in making the necessary academic shift.

A significant part of the experience of transition involves students in coming to terms with the parameters of higher education English. Many students are uncertain about course structures, teaching methods and rationales, the requirements of independent study, assessment procedures, and the means of functioning effectively in the higher education context. It is important that students come to terms early with the many changes they face and develop a clear sense of how English is shaped and ordered as an academic discipline.

For Bourdieu (1990, 40) "In any given social formation, the pedagogic work through which the dominant pedagogic action is carried on always has a function of keeping order."

Pedagogic work is the means by which he believes habitus[1] is inculcated, and by which functional rules are established within the academic context. Significant issues emerge, therefore, in relation to the transparency of such pedagogic work and its underlying rationales.

Order-keeping in the educational institution

Green (2007a) summarises the order-keeping functions of academic institutions thus (see Textbox 1).

Textbox 1: Order-keeping through pedagogic work in the educational institution

Order-keeping through pedagogic work

- curriculum content
- methods of delivery (pedagogy)
- dictating the terms (and times) of staff-student contact
- modes of assessment

The differing formations these take at post-16 and higher education levels can lead to confusion and uncertainty as students manage their transition. Lectures and seminars, for example, tend to utilise a narrower range of pedagogic approaches than A level (Green, 2005b). This obliges students to reconceptualise engagement with their subject. Similarly, the primacy of the set text at post-16 level and the dominant principles of assessment encourage students to fashion their responses to texts in quite different ways than are expected in higher education.

Table 1 outlines more fully some of the significant differences in order between post-16 and higher education English.

This indicates a number of key ways in which students' experiences and expectations are ordered by different educational environments. Such differences clearly have a significant impact upon effective student transition.

Assessment

Students' text-centric expectations and assumptions within the UK context (Green, 2007c) are largely created by the nature of assessment. This is observed by Hodgson and Spours (2003), Green (2005a) and Barlow (2005), amongst others. The possibility of module retakes impacts on grades, as Barlow demonstrates, and also upon the ways in which students conceive of the nature and purpose of learning. Instead of allowing and encouraging students to broaden their exposure *to* and practice *of* literary study, it appears that many teachers have instrumentally used assessment as a means of inflating students' examination performance at the expense of genuine cognitive gains (Hodgson & Spours, 2003).

[1] Bourdieu defines habitus as "the site of the internalisation of externality and the externalisation of internality" (205). The habitus is, therefore, a subjective construct formed by the individual's experiences of a variety of fields within the objective world. The habitus in its turn is the means by which the individual (in this case the student) views and relates to the outside world (in this case the world of the higher educational institution). The habitus is, therefore, a subjective force, objectively formed by a variety of factors, such as social class and parental views.

Table 1: Order-keeping pedagogic work at sixth form and in higher education (Green, 2007a)

	Sixth form	Higher education
Curriculum	• Students study for English as one of four or occasionally five subjects in the first year, then usually drop one subject as they progress to the second	• Students follow Single honours, Combined honours or Major/minor programmes of study
	• Students follow three modules per year, each requiring the minimum (often in reality *maximum*) study of one or two texts per module	• Students typically follow four modules per year, each covering a wide range of texts
	• Some (often minimal) emphasis is placed on the use of literary theory in relation to set texts (AO4 and AO5 in English Literature specifications; AO3 and AO4 in English Language and Literature specifications)	• Literary theory often plays an extensive and significant role
	• Tendency towards a limited and largely canonical list of set texts – where more adventurous texts (e.g. Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor* in comparison with Barry Unsworth's *Sacred Hunger*) are set, take-up tends to be very limited	• Tendency to cover a wide range of texts, both canonical and non-canonical
Methods of 'delivery'	• Slow coverage, generally of a maximum of 10 texts	• Quick coverage of many texts
	• Strongly guided reading	• Reading largely unguided
	• Little secondary reading	• Much secondary reading
	• Small teaching groups (typically 12-18)	• Seminars and lectures (and very rarely, tutorials) – large forum teaching
	• Interactive methods of teaching, employing a variety of techniques such as drama and Directed Activities Related to Texts (DARTs)	• Students often passive a more limited variety of approaches to teaching
Staff-student contact	• Close contact, usually with one or two teachers	• Distant contact, often with many lecturers
	• Regular personal contact with teachers – usually about five or six hours per week	• More limited contact, often impersonal owing to group sizes – often only one hour per week
	• Staff frequently available	• Staff contact often limited to office hours and email

Table 1: Order-keeping pedagogic work at sixth form and in higher education (Green, 2007a) continued

	Sixth form	Higher education
Assessment	• Detailed (and structuring) assessment regime – evidence suggests this often over-rides cognitive content	• Assessment subservient to cognitive content
	• Assessment Objectives weighted and allocated to specific texts – can encourage students into atomised rather than holistic views of text and of the discipline as a whole	• Holistic views of text and of discipline required throughout university study
	• Assessment Objectives often used in teaching – heavy emphasis on assessment	• Assessment Objectives not usually used in teaching
	• Regular retakes are possible throughout both years	• Assessment generally at year end
	• Grades can improve in retakes, leading to problems of grade maximisation and inflation (Barlow, 2005)	• Where retakes are permitted, retake grade has a ceiling mark – usually pass only

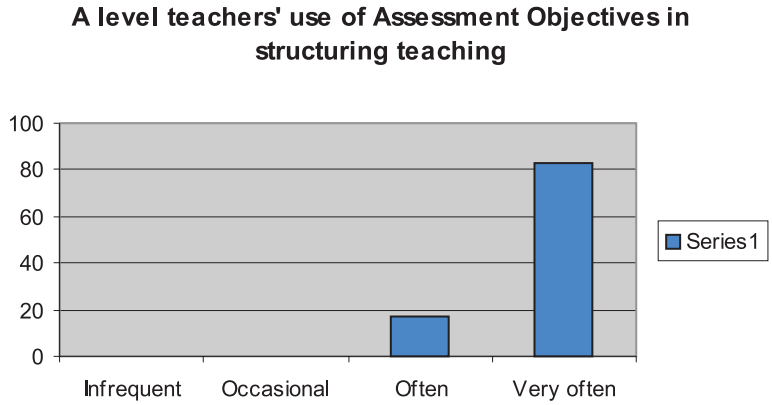

Figure 1: A level teachers' use of Assessment Objectives in structuring teaching

Students carry the impact of this into their study of English at university. Many students find the separation of study from such rigorous assessment confines at degree level profoundly dislocating. They are forced radically to challenge and relocate their sense of what English is. Asked to identify the extent to which they employ the Assessment Objectives in their teaching, and the extent to which they explicitly discuss this with their students, sixth form teachers' response was striking (see Figure 1).

A number of interviewees and many questionnaire respondents comment on the extent to which their thinking and response in English has been shaped by the Assessment Objectives. Post-16 study with its time pressures and narrowly targeted assessment demands (Hodgson & Spours, 2003; Barlow, 2005), has led to increased difficulties for students as they seek to come to terms with the demands of university study. One questionnaire respondent sums this up as

follows: "At A level we were more directed at answering the question, which is completely different to the approach adopted at university".

And an interviewee, reflecting back on her experiences of A level at the end of the first year of her degree, states that

> To be honest my A level experience of English (although enjoyable) had a simple 'philosophy' – to stick to Assessment Objectives so examiners can give you the highest possible marks! It was mainly about passing the exams and gaining good grades.

The internalisation of such assumptions and the expectations they create is a very significant factor in students' progression to university and causes many new undergraduates difficulty.

Staff-student contact

The nature of staff-student contact is also important. Post-16 classes tend to be comparatively intimate. Contact with teachers and peers is frequent and sustained, and allows for high levels of interpersonal engagement. This is very different from the situation at university, where teaching is often undertaken in larger seminars and lectures, and where much more is required of independent study (Green, 2007b). The relationship between students and staff is less personal, and it is comparatively easy for students to become isolated. The social context of learning is substantially different from that pertaining at A level and can, unless carefully mediated, limit students' academic development. For many students, the lack of close contact with academic staff is a significant boundary to overcome.

Study skills and training

The changing nature of study skills also emerges as a significant issue within the data. The skills required of students in any given discipline are, as Durkin and Main (2002) suggest, best conceived of and taught within the confines of that subject. Where such subject-based training is provided, skills are not dislocated from practice, but integrated with it. This is not to suggest that skills are or should be a purely implicit dimension of subject, although Bourdieu's perfect model of educational reproduction would have it that such totally internalised, implicit inculcation is possible. On the contrary, skills need to be taught explicitly alongside cognitive content to enable students to develop in autonomy. The data make evident that for a variety of reasons (e.g. assessment or curriculum) the skills required to succeed at post-16 level and those required to succeed at university do not straightforwardly connect with each other.

Grossman, Wilson and Shulman (1989) consider syntactic dimensions of subject and subject knowledge formation. These, they suggest, relate to the tools and forms of inquiry within a discipline. Canons of understanding, disciplinary formation of evidence and proof, and the ways in which new material enters the body of knowledge are all significant here. This is subject not as content, but as process. Such syntactic issues are unfamiliar to many students entering higher education. However, with the substantial quantities of independent research and extended writing required at university, they are a key element of success. As developing learners, students need to be introduced systematically to the conventions and processes by which English as a discipline functions. Tacit knowledge of such procedures carries a certain weight, but metacognitive engagement needs to be more and more explicit and more and more detailed as students advance.

Without explicit teaching in these areas, students will naturally apply the understanding and expectations they import from their experiences of studying English post-16, which often remain influential in determining students' engagement with higher education. Bourdieu (1990, 33) observes such impact and seeks to measure the productivity of any educational work or experience according to its transposability:

> The specific productivity of pedagogic work, i.e. the degree to which it manages to inculcate in the legitimate addressees the cultural arbitrary it is mandated to reproduce, is measured by the degree to which the habitus it produces is transposable, i.e. capable of generating practices conforming with the principles of the inculcated arbitrary in a greater number of different fields.

It is important, therefore, to question how far post-16 study provides students with effective transposable versions of subject and perspectives that will assist them creatively to engage with the demands of university English. Conversely, it is important to consider how far lecturers understand what is being transposed. The creation of appropriate mediated and creative learning environments assists students in coming to terms with the demands of the new learning environment.

The role of mediated creativity is, the data suggest, increasingly absent from post-16 English. In support of this view, Hodgson and Spours (2003) adduce the damaging effect crowded curricula have had upon the space and time available for more experimental and creative teaching and learning. If students entering degree level studies are to engage effectively in the kinds of sophisticated intellectual risk-taking Knights (2004) advocates, the creation of opportunities for sustained critical-creative experiences at post-16 level is required.

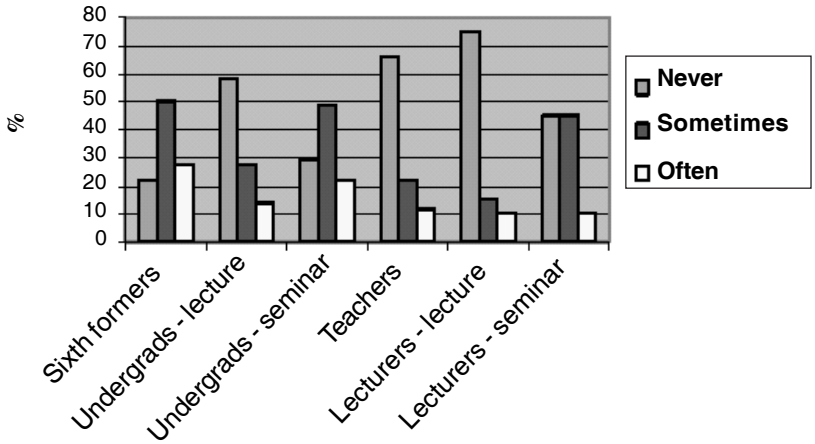

Figure 2: Creative, recreative and free writing

On the evidence of questionnaire, observational and interview data, however, mediated opportunities for such experimentation are also tellingly absent in the higher education context. Figure 2 summarises survey data showing the frequency with which creative, recreative and free writing are employed in higher education and at post-16 level. It is interesting to note that creative approaches are experienced often by only a minority of students. It is still more striking that the majority of teachers (overwhelmingly so in higher education) do not regard creative approaches as useful pedagogic tools (see Figure 3).

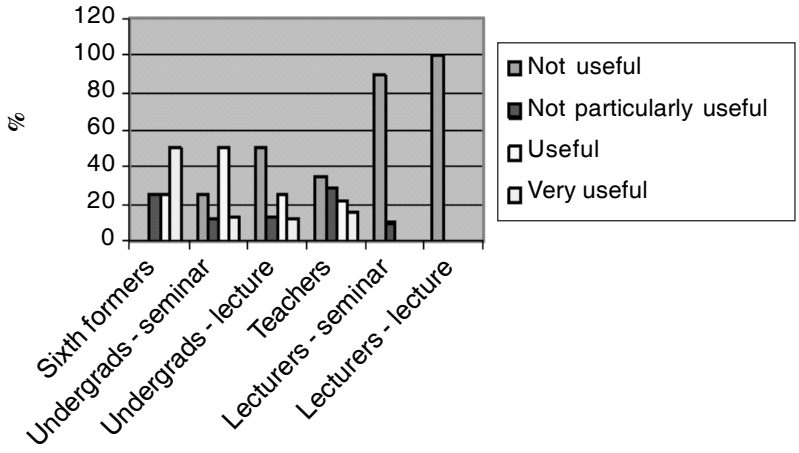

Figure 3: Perceived usefulness of creative, recreative and free writing

Lectures and seminars

Particular issues also emerge in relation to students' abilities to operate effectively within seminars and lectures. As indicated earlier, seminars and lectures are radically different to post-16 teaching, where students are frequently very closely guided. When faced with the freedom of the university seminar, many students struggle to make sense of the experience (Rosslyn, 2005). The "uncomfortable silence around which the tutor and two or three of the more vocal, confident or uninhibited students manoeuvre" Knights (2005, 265) identifies is all too familiar. The lack of perceived and familiar structure distances students from effective engagement in learning. In effect the freedom lecturers wish to encourage is in reality anything but liberating for students. Instead of opening doors of possibility, such freedom frequently serves to close them. The desired openness of dialogue and discourse within the seminar (especially after the "unvoicing" experience of a preparatory lecture, where students rarely have the opportunity to challenge or question the ideas presented to them) becomes a threatening uncertainty. The removal of boundaries in fact operates as the most potent of boundaries in its own right, preventing many students from successfully engaging in the early phases of their university studies.

The pedagogic constitutions of post-16 and higher education English are thus thrown into relief with each other at the point of transition. Both seek, through their respective pedagogic works, to create distinct definitions of what constitutes expertise or accomplishment. Bourdieu (1990, 34) writes:

> … [A] pedagogic action implies, in addition to a delimitation of the content inculcated [the curriculum for study]*, a definition of the mode of inculcation (the legitimate mode of inculcation) [the means of pedagogic transmission, i.e. lectures, seminars etc.]* and of the length of inculcation (the legitimate training period) [length of programme: two years for A level; three years for degree, etc.]*, which define the degree of completion of pedagogic work considered necessary and sufficient to produce the accomplished form of the habitus, i.e. the degree of cultural attainment (the degree of legitimate competence) by which a group or class recognises the accomplished man.

(* Material in square brackets constitutes the author's own examples in response to Bourdieu's observations.)

This highlights the dilemma of transition. Accomplishment (and the different means by which accomplishment is taught, displayed and assessed) is substantially different in nature between post-16 and degree level English. This is likely to create uncertainty in students about

what they are trying to achieve and the means by which it can be achieved. Thus difficulties emerge for lecturers and students as they (re)define and (re)negotiate the pedagogic encounters of lectures, seminars and independent study.

To return to Bourdieu's observations on transposabilty, then, transition highlights two mutually interdependent issues:

- the need for post-16 study to provide a corpus of useful and relevant transposable abilities for use within higher education; and
- the need for lecturers to recognise what abilities their incoming students *do* and *do not* bring with them and to reflect this within their pedagogical choices.

Teachers and lecturers are, therefore, a mediating influence between the institutions and students. Pedagogy functions simultaneously as a means of empowerment and a product of necessity. It recognises the imperatives (cultural, curricular, philosophical) of the institution, and seeks to enable students to operate and demonstrate accomplishment within these imperatives. This necessitates the development of a range of critical-creative pedagogic practices. Knights (2005) argues that pedagogic encounters, if they are to be effective, must be dialogic. Effective pedagogic encounters are mutually satisfying constructs created by students and teachers through interaction. As FR Leavis famously used to say, literature is the place where minds meet. The essential presuppositions of English as a discipline and therefore of English pedagogy are dialogue and interaction.

It is important to recognise, however, that in any given educational institution or system the form such dialogic interaction takes and the issues which are open to interrogation will vary. What this means in reality is that there are certain limitations to pedagogic practices. There are certain choices that teachers and lecturers are not free to make, because they fall without the definitions of sanctioned institutional orthodoxies. It is not, for instance, possible for teachers to dictate the size of teaching groups or to make a totally free choice of texts. Nor is it possible for lecturers to jettison the lecture, in spite of its dubious credentials as a learning environment (Evans, 1993).

Reproduction in higher education

Cultural reproduction within post-16 and higher education is significant here. Interview data demonstrate that students wish to do what they think their lecturers want of them. They wish, in other words, to comply because they wish to succeed. Whether it is for personal, social and cultural development or for pragmatic reasons, students have a vested interest in playing along with the game. Reproduction, in Bourdieu's sense, is of value not only to the educational institution in retaining the *status quo*, but also to the student. The extent to which students can or will acquiesce, even where they perceive difficulties in so doing, depends upon the extent to which they understand and value institutionalised outcomes. Students' notions of what university English departments are trying to (re)produce has become less secure as the relationship between post-16 and higher education has become increasingly problematic.

Lowe and Cook (2003, 63) find that "about one-third of the cohort [of new undergraduates] appear to expect teaching styles associated with school". University learning, however, is radically different from students' post-16 experience, and this causes students to struggle in their transition to university. Almost all undergraduates surveyed indicate difficulties in coming to terms with how to function effectively in lectures and seminars. They also encounter significant difficulties with managing independent study (Green, 2007b).

Bourdieu's (1990, 32) identification of the inertia of educational institutions is helpful here. If, as he argues, the "essential function always leads them [educational institutions] to self-reproduce as unchanged as possible", then the pedagogical principles of school and university (as separate inert institutions) are likely to conflict.

A broadening student base and pedagogic implications

Issues of transition are still more difficult to manage when dealing with non-traditional students. Such students, a growing body of which is now entering higher education under New Labour's widening participation agenda, face particular difficulties in managing transition. The roots of such difficulty lie again in the expectations and the academic practices these students bring with them to university study. Typically these students reflect and relate to the cultural and educational practices of higher education to a lesser degree than conventional university entrants. The result of this, unless pedagogic practices are modified to take account of these differences, is likely to be alienation. Bourdieu (1990, 41) reflects on this:

> ... the pedagogic work ... tends ... to impose on them [the dominated groups] by inculcation or exclusion, recognition of the illegitimacy of their own cultural arbitrary.

With a wider (more democratic?) range of students entering higher education, the number of students coming into contact (and conflict) with new cultural formations and expectations increases. This will inevitably multiply the difficulties of transition, especially if, as the data in Figure 4 suggest, pedagogic approaches do not adapt to students' changing needs.

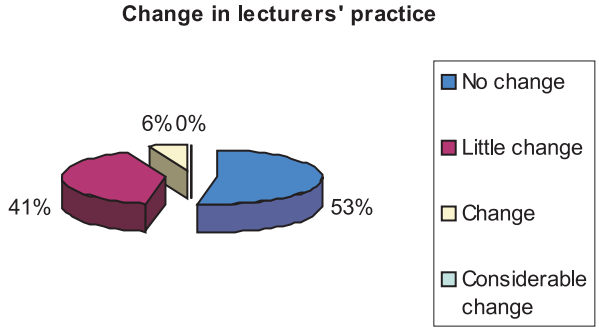

Figure 4: Changes in lecturers' teaching practice

Here it is important to consider the benefits of explicit over implicit pedagogy, and its impact on student learning. Bourdieu (1990, 47) makes a useful distinction in relation to this:

> between (1) the mode of inculcation producing a habitus by the unconscious inculcation of principles which manifest themselves only in their practical state, within the practice that is imposed (implicit pedagogy) and (2) the mode of inculcation producing a habitus by the inculcation, methodically organised as such, of articulated and even formalised principles (explicit pedagogy).

Student and lecturer questionnaire responses suggest that pedagogy within English resides towards the implicit end of the spectrum – possibly because lecturers' training means that their own pedagogic awareness (as people effectively trained within the system, as it were) is in itself implicit. This process of implicit inculcation, Bourdieu (1990, 48) describes as a cycle, thus:

> … a process in which the master transmits unconsciously, through exemplary conduct, principles he has never mastered consciously, to a receiver who internalises them unconsciously.

Exemplification and imitation of this sort are significant components in any pedagogic encounter. However, to reduce the act of teaching to this alone would be pedagogic redundancy. Grossman, Wilson & Shulman (1989, 23) emphasise the importance of making the processes of subject

(which are the basis of pedagogy in that subject) an explicit focus of teaching. In fact, they go so far as to note:

> Given the central role subject matter plays in teaching, we must re-examine our assumption that the subject matter knowledge required for teaching can be acquired solely through courses taken in the appropriate university department.

They clearly indicate that pedagogy must be an explicit dimension of reflective and effective practice.

Conclusions

In their research into early university experience in Australian universities, McInnins and James (1995) identify that divergences exist not only between schools and universities, but also between students and lecturers, a conclusion supported by my own data. In the UK context, students' experiences of English post-16 have changed significantly. University teaching, if it is to continue to reach students effectively, needs to be modified to reflect this. This is not to say that taught content needs to be cognitively less challenging or that students should be patronised. It rather means that the consideration of pedagogical aims, rationales and processes requires a higher profile. Reflexive pedagogic practice (a move away from implicit towards more explicit pedagogy) would, as Knights (2005) suggests, encourage the perception amongst both lecturers and students that pedagogy lies at the heart not on the periphery of academic disciplines. Discussion of pedagogic issues can, therefore, serve only to enhance students' and lecturers' experiences, and their abilities to engage in a variety of meaningful and stimulating ways with the subject they have chosen to study and/or teach. The likely impact of such discussion and its practical outcomes on transition is self-evident.

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