



Towards Inclusive Teaching and Learning in Humanities: alternatives to writing

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ABSTRACT

A movement towards inclusiveness in higher education has been gaining momentum, driven by concerns for a number of groups that experience difficulties with traditional methods of teaching. The push to widen participation in higher education has highlighted a need for, broadly, three kinds of inclusion: physical, cultural, and cognitive. While many universities have adopted inclusive teaching as a policy, it is yet to be widely 'owned' by lecturers who design subject curricula. Focusing on teaching in the humanities, this paper discusses what is needed to make inclusion intellectually persuasive and practically feasible. It looks at the work of disability specialists in re-thinking the ways in which academic subjects might be learned and assessed, and the potential for adapting their ideas to develop a greater range of skills in all students, and help them to learn more effectively.

Towards inclusion

A movement towards inclusiveness in higher education has been gaining momentum, driven by concerns relating to a number of groups that experience difficulties with traditional methods of teaching (see, e.g. for Australia, Academic Development Unit, La Trobe University, 2002; University of South Australia, 2001; for the US, Scott *et al.* 2003; for the UK, Macdonald & Stratta, 2001). These include disabled students; students whose first language is not English; students from marginalised cultural backgrounds; students from socio-economic backgrounds in which experience of higher education has been recent, rare, and often disappointing; and, to a lesser degree, students whose learning style preferences are incompatible with the ways their courses are taught. The push to widen participation in higher education (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (NCIHE), 1997) has highlighted a need for, broadly, three kinds of inclusion: physical, cultural, and cognitive. While it is helpful, analytically, to separate

these, it is not necessarily useful to deal with them separately, as is often done at present.

Meanings of inclusion

It is possible to conceptualise inclusion in either of two ways. The first is that nobody in particular should be disadvantaged by existing arrangements in the university. The second, more comprehensive, vision is that everybody should be helped to learn by a curriculum designed to accomplish this (Scott *et al.* 2003). The first way of understanding inclusion generates different solutions for different groups, and in doing so, marks each group as 'other' with reference to a notional 'mainstream', and finds ways of enabling that group to produce, as far as possible, the kinds of performances required of 'mainstream' students. The second understanding responds to the diversity of the student population, and the complexity of each individual student, by changing the performances required of every student. As the authors of the SPACE project put it:

Taking diversity as the platform for assessment change means establishing inclusive modes of assessment, flexibility and choice that meet the skills of diverse learners, disabled or non-disabled: that is the essence of matching procedures to people, not matching people to procedures.
(Waterfield & West, 2006, section 5.3, p.16).

While many universities have moved from the first understanding to the second in policy terms, such policy is much more difficult to implement in teaching (e.g. Macdonald & Stratta, 2001; Scott *et al.* 2003). It needs to be intellectually persuasive to lecturers, and feasible (Herrington, 2000); and in both of these areas, considerable work remains to be done. Courses in the humanities and social sciences, in particular, are slow to offer alternatives to writing as a way of learning and of demonstrating learning for assessment. Here, I would like to examine the reasons for this; to argue for diversification of teaching and learning methods within the Bachelor of Arts degree (BA); and to look at how some of the work being done to support disabled students might contribute to a change in curriculum for all students.

I noted, above, that it can be useful to think about inclusion as being of three kinds. There are aspects of physical inclusion, for example, that, while costly, are fairly straightforward to achieve: modification to buildings to accommodate wheelchairs, employment of sign language interpreters, provision of hardware and software to compensate for

some kinds of physical impairments, etc. (see e.g. Burgstahler). Similarly, there are aspects of cultural inclusion that seem to belong to the realm of content rather than method (University of South Australia, 2001), such as reviewing the material covered in each subject to ensure that where culturally marginalised people have played a part in the events that subject focuses on, their part is respectfully acknowledged. Cognitive inclusion, however, is a fuzzier area, and in thinking about it, we come to realise that the other two areas are also problematic to separate. Some aspects of disability are cognitive, such as the holistic, non-linear thought patterns frequently associated with dyslexia (e.g. Herrington, 2001, pp.188-189). Some learning styles preferences are cultural, such as the social learning often organised by students from Confucian-heritage cultures, or the strategy of memorising to achieve deeper understanding (Marton *et al.* 1996). Diversity is not a collection of distinct conditions or circumstances that can be dealt with as they arise. This suggests that a more all-inclusive approach to teaching could be more helpful than an each-inclusive approach, by offering more options for learning and assessment to all our students – ‘an integrative approach is preferable to multiple separate solutions’ (Scott *et al.* 2003).

Identification of learning with writing

I focus on the BA because I work as an academic skills adviser in a faculty of humanities and social sciences, whose offerings span the range from linguistics, languages, and English, through cinema studies, media, and drama, to philosophy, politics, legal studies, sociology, and history. And I focus on writing because of its domination of learning and teaching in the BA. In my faculty, assessment is expressed as a number of written words (5,000 per subject per semester), or some equivalent (for example, an exam might count as 2,000 words). Inevitably, this means that students are not necessarily being assessed on what they have learnt or thought; they are always assessed on the quality of their writing. To their lecturers this is not problematic, because quality of writing is closely equated with quality of learning, and there are powerful reasons why this is the case.

It is common cause, among teachers at all levels, that writing is indispensable to learning – that it is through writing that students work out their ideas, elaborate their discussions, and shape the texts by which they are assessed. As Gordon Taylor puts it, ‘In writing we bring knowledge into being, we record and preserve it. Writing is the seed, the fruit and the pickle of our understanding’ (1989, p.1). It

is a common rhetorical move for academic skills textbooks to begin chapters on writing, as Taylor does (1989, p.1), by quoting Forster's question, 'How do I know what I think until I see what I say?'. Creme & Lea speak for many when they advise students:

We believe that writing for your studies and learning for your studies are so integrally related that they cannot be separated from each other ... Writing essays and other assignments is about more than [assessment and grades]: it is fundamentally about learning.
(1997, p.1)

It is not simply about learning information, moreover, but just as importantly, about learning the ways of thinking in the discipline. 'As you learn to write in a particular way for a particular subject you are learning how to make sense of that subject', say Creme & Lea, because 'academic disciplines have their own ways of organising knowledge' (1997, p.1). It is difficult, therefore, to envisage an alternative to writing as a way into membership of the intellectual and social community of a discipline.

It is not my purpose here to dispute any of the benefits claimed by Creme & Lea, and indeed by the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) movement in the US (Russell, 1991; Klein, 1999), devoted to making writing-to-learn an integral activity in disciplines other than English. These include the learning resulting: 1) from articulating one's thoughts; 2) from reviewing and revising one's text; 3) from making the particular connections between ideas that particular genres require; and 4) from organising and expressing ideas to achieve particular rhetorical goals (Klein, 1999). Although, as Klein (1999) points out, the evidence allows us to infer that more writing develops better writing but not necessarily that writing results in better learning (as this has not been tested adequately); it is intuitively evident to writers that they learn by writing.

Nevertheless, my work with students has shown, time and again, that many students are more articulate in oral discussion than they are in writing and, for some, the requirement to produce a polished product can be an obstacle to learning in itself. This is most dramatically demonstrated by students with dyslexia, for some of whom 'The mechanical and conventional demands of producing text appear to interfere with the fluency and quality of written expression' (Clark, 1988, p.26). Because their writing is very slow, they lose the coherence of their train of thought; and because they know that it is inaccurate, and that they cannot recognise the inaccuracies, they devote much time to correction that would be better spent in learning

(e.g. Pollack, 2001). It is dispiriting to think of the effort required for a student with dyslexia (quoted by Cooke, 2001) to change this sentence – ‘frm as far bak as rekuds ar kept mentil ilnes has ben defned xplrud ad dokumntd in teh letretre’ – to this: ‘From as far back as records are kept, mental illness has been defined, explored and documented in the literature’. The various ways in which writing develops learning are not so readily available to students; or rather, they might be gained by students writing to the stage where *they* know what they have written, although other readers cannot make it out; and at this point, they could display their learning more advantageously by speaking from their ‘notes to self’. Arguably, this process can confer the first, third and fourth of the benefits WAC claims for writing (Klein, 1999, above), though not the second.

The inadequacy of attempts to enable students with dyslexia to compete in ‘mainstream’ written performances is shown by some of the accommodations designed to ‘level the playing field’ in examinations. In some institutions, exam papers of students with dyslexia are identified with stickers, and assessors are asked to bear the students’ disability in mind when marking. The University of Nottingham’s ‘Marking Guidelines for Dyslexic Students in Examinations’, for example, recommends: ‘wherever possible, do not penalise for errors in spelling, syntax, word order, and expression.’ Instead, ‘mark positively for content, focusing on what the student is trying to say or argue rather than on minor errors’ (Study Support Centre). It may not be easy, however, for readers to distinguish the causes of error, like the marker quoted by Miles & Gilroy (1986, p.130), who asked a student

‘whether she really considered that she ought to continue at university. My concern relates not to the historical material in the essay but to the almost total inability to express herself in intelligible terms. Sometimes this is clearly a matter of dyslexia but more often it is simply inability to put a straightforward proposition on paper [how could he tell?] ... I am bound to say that I take a very gloomy view of her prospects.’

Behind this kind of judgment is the widespread belief that clarity in writing is evidence of clarity in thinking, and that its absence is proof of confusion. For example, we find this assumption informing a marking sheet quoted by Ballard & Clanchy, where the marker warns that ‘Looseness of expression will be taken to indicate looseness of thought!’ (1988, p.11). Given the powerful cultural currency of this assumption, it may not be very effective to rely on markers to set it aside when they read the assignments of students with dyslexia.

Accommodations like sympathetic reading, voice-recognition software (which converts dictation to text), screen-reading software (which converts text to speech, so that students can hear the errors in their writing), and extended deadlines are all helpful in compensating for what students with dyslexia cannot do, but the aim is still to produce a text as similar as possible to what students without dyslexia are writing. They do not really make it possible for the students to show what they might do if correct writing were not an issue.

Alternatives to writing

I am not suggesting that writing should not be required in humanities, nor that other modes can accomplish everything that writing can. As Gibbs & Simpson (2004-05, p.15) point out, 'Probably the only way to gain facility with the discourse of a discipline is to undertake plenty of practice in using that discourse, for example through writing'. However, 'facility' is not an option for everybody; moreover, learning to reproduce the discourse of one's discipline is not the whole of learning. Activities and assessments can be scrutinised to determine whether they necessarily assess what they purport to, and whether some other activity might not assess particular learning objectives equally well, or better. The literature on assessment strongly advocates that teachers pinpoint what they want the students to learn, and ensure that assessment is 'fit for purpose' (Brown, 2004-05, pp.81-83).

Students would have more time to explore ideas if every assessment did not depend on writing, and it is the search for alternative assessments suitable for students with dyslexia that has led me into the literature on different learning styles and different kinds of intelligence. For it is not only students with dyslexia who could benefit from a more diverse range of ways of demonstrating their learning. If Forster's question were rephrased – 'How do I know what I think until I hear what I say?' – it would have resonance for many students who consult me because they need to speak their ideas before they can write them. For them, as well as for students with dyslexia, audio-recording their ideas for assessment could reveal more about their learning than their written performances often do. Similarly, for students who organise their thoughts visually, incorporating space and pictorial elements, the option of diagramming answers might display their learning best. It is often pointed out, for example by Singleton in the *Report of the National Working Party on Dyslexia in Higher Education* (1999, p.169), that 'many of the changes in practice in teaching and learning that are vital for dyslexic students can also be

beneficial for other students'. Indeed, Pollack (2001) quotes a student with dyslexia who asked, if everyone was taught in a variety of ways, 'would you be making the issue of being dyslexic almost redundant?'

Various ways of classifying learning styles are based upon innate talents, or attitudes, or strategies which an individual characteristically employs. Gardiner's (1985) multiple intelligences are perhaps the best known: verbal, logical, visual, interpersonal, intrapersonal, kinaesthetic, and musical intelligence. Alternatively, Felder (1993) sees people as leaning toward either a more active or a more reflective style of learning (preferring either to do something, or to think about it first); a more sensing or a more intuitive style (preferring to follow a routine of learning, or else to make a leap of discovery); a more verbal or a more visual style (thinking in words or pictures); and a more global or more sequential style (seeing the whole picture, or moving step by step).

Whatever characteristics of learning they stress, these theorists think that people can learn more comfortably, and more efficiently, if they become aware of their strongest kinds of intelligence, or their preferred learning styles, and use them. However, learning styles are not reduced to 'either/or'; everybody learns in a variety of ways, and different ways are suited to different kinds of tasks. Mortimore (2003) therefore advocates that learners should try to develop their skills in using strategies other than those which are most congenial to them, in order to extend the range of things they can do.

Whilst the literature on learning styles is vast, a wide-ranging study by Coffield *et al.* (2004) found no common framework in the many theories of learning styles which they examined; 'no consensus ... about the most effective instrument for measuring learning styles and no agreement about the most appropriate pedagogical interventions'. Learning styles theories should be approached with caution, therefore; but it is probably the simplistic pigeonholing of learners of whatever sort into opposite 'types' that ought to be resisted, rather than the underlying insight that people do learn differently, and that not all students will learn most effectively, or display their learning to best advantage, in the ways that seem most natural to their lecturers.

The traditional response to this diversity has been that people who learn best by means other than reading and writing should go into fields other than humanities and social sciences; in other words, individuals should adapt their aspirations to fit their talents, rather than fields of study adapting to a range of talents. However, the

assumption that students who lack facility with written language have little to give or to gain from humanities rests on a narrow view of the student and of the nature of thought in the humanities.

Instead, other forms of expression are not unsuited to the humanities, and at times they are highly valued. Undergraduate humanities subjects favour the essay form, because it is believed that only in extended pieces of writing can one construct a complex and nuanced argument. At higher levels, however, oral presentations are common in seminars or at conferences, often based on point form plans or diagrams. Some of the questions that most engage scholars in humanities and social sciences may be inherently more suited to expression in diagrammatic form than in prose. The discourse of study in an Arts degree abounds with 'models', which are, after all, spatial metaphors for abstract ideas about how things work – in the mind (e.g. the levels of superego, ego and id), in the social structure (e.g. the social pyramid of 18th century British society), in the political system (e.g. tiers of government, or checks and balances), or in the economy (e.g. the equilibrium between supply and demand).

When a student consulted me recently with a draft on the question 'What is your personal anthropology?' - meaning 'what is your model of yourself in your society, where does it come from and what are its implications for your examination of other cultures?' - we had to step back a bit and talk about what a model is. We talked about models such as trees (for kinship systems or organisational structures), pyramids (the social pyramid), webs (as in ecologies or communications), fabrics (the social fabric), and bodies (the body politic), and to help her think about this essay topic, we developed a model of concentric circles with the student at the centre, surrounded by her family in the next ring, her community in the ring beyond that, and her society in the outermost ring. Every year, students have great difficulty writing about this topic, and this year I found myself wondering: why is the answer an essay, when the question itself is about a multi-dimensional image functioning as a metaphor? Why could the answer not be an image, or perhaps an oral exposition of a diagram?

While writing is indispensable when we want to send our ideas out unaccompanied, I would like to suggest that it is not incompatible with values in the humanities to bring in a range of ways of communicating ideas for assessment. People who are not comfortable with writing might opt to do less, and to choose, for some of their assessments, modes which enable them to show what they do better.

Diversifying students' skills

It may, moreover, be an opportune moment to propose that all students be trained to work in a range of modes, both to take advantage of the skills they have and to develop the ones they do not have to the same degree. Universities are struggling at present to meet the demands of government and employers for what are being called 'Graduate Skills' (Chanock, 2004), and although the question of what graduate skills should be is still subject to scrutiny, it is clear that employers feel that oral skills of graduates are underdeveloped, as well as their skills in collaborating with others (DETYA, 2000). We might respond to the first concern by requiring an oral performance from each student; going further, we could meet the second by requiring pairs of students to produce an oral presentation with extensive use of visual aids, to give scope for students to combine their different strengths towards a shared goal.

These suggestions gain support from the literature both on assessment generally (e.g. Brown, 2004-05), and on assessment of disabled students. For example, an extensive investigation into the experiences of disabled students, carried out by eight universities in the UK, found that their preferred modes of assessment were 'continuous assessment; coursework with discussion; oral examinations; portfolios and sketchbooks; personal research projects; critical diaries, learning logs and journals; [and] exhibition and poster displays' (Waterfield & West, 2006, section 5.4, p.20).

Maintaining standards by making academic purposes more explicit

If anxieties persist about the capacity of such performances to carry out the intellectual purposes of particular subjects, they might be countered by making these purposes more explicit so that students can more readily fulfil them (in itself a key recommendation for making teaching inclusive of all students e.g. Academic Development Unit, La Trobe University, 2002). For example, 'writing frames' – that is, templates for organising the reception and production of information for various purposes – can be used to orient students to the purposes and processes of knowledge-making in their disciplines. These purposes generate genres embodying conventional structures of thought and communication which can be visualised in frames to guide presentation in a range of modes – writing, certainly, but also oral presentation or expositions of visual representations.

For example, when students are asked to develop their own question on a topic, I suggest that they ask themselves:

1. What problem/question is associated with this topic?
2. Who, in this discipline, has tried to solve or answer it?
3. How have they tried?
4. How successful have they been (or not)?
5. What problem(s) remain?

Such a routine may seem obvious to academics, but is not obvious to students. The frame above, for example, makes visible the assumption that academic work is directed at discovering, and contributing to, the construction of knowledge in the context of a discipline. This is a very different matter from looking for the answer to a question, which is how students – reasonably – approach their assignments unless and until they are acculturated into academic life. That acculturation can be facilitated if lecturers examine the kinds of tasks they ask students to do, and develop frames with which to approach them. These can then help students to discern the purpose and structure of assigned reading; to follow class discussions, where frames are provided as advance organisers; to organise activities in preparation for joint presentations; to generate questions for research; and to structure a range of performances such as oral presentations, posters, essays, reports, or literature reviews.

Implementing inclusive curricula

The use of frames is just one example of what is needed to implement the aims of inclusive learning: that is, a more concrete sense of what teaching to students' different learning styles would mean. The recommendations made by disability services and learning styles advocates are helpful, but are usually at a level of generality that lecturers may find difficult to translate into activities and assessments well suited to their subjects. For example, a publication of the University of Tasmania, 'We just learn differently' (Spurr, 2001), recommends that lecturers 'Use a variety of teaching styles and methods incorporating as many mediums (appealing to sight and sound) as possible when presenting material'. In setting assignments, they should 'Allow for alternative assignment formats: for example, oral reports, demonstrations or use of a tape recorder ... [and] consider alternative or supplementary assignments such as point form, taped interviews, slide presentations, photographic essays or

models'. Whether this sort of thing sounds exciting or daunting must depend on the skills of teaching staff and on the nature of the subjects they teach. Herrington (2000), in reporting a regional project in a cluster of British universities to raise staff awareness of the need to vary their teaching, stresses the importance of staff identifying their own needs, and 'owning' the changes they have made. This could be a recipe for inertia, of course, but it is important that people be motivated to make changes; and it may help if they can see that the purposes of assessment they consider important can be fulfilled in a range of ways.

For performances other than writing, it is important that students get practice in using alternative modes to learn before they are asked to use them to demonstrate their learning. Students could spend their first tutorial, for example, reading their subject guide and diagramming the design of the subject. A different student each week could stand at the whiteboard diagramming the tutorial discussion as it unfolds. Students could work in pairs, as I have suggested, to produce oral tutorial presentations supported by both written versions and diagrams. A number of ideas seem possible, and it would be valuable to have other people's experiences to consider. This is where the work of specialists in supporting disabled students has much to offer the 'mainstream'. Applications of Universal Design for Instruction in university teaching are documented in Scott *et al.* (2003) and, as they point out, activities and assessments that are introduced as options for disabled students may prove just as helpful to students with limited linguistic resources or academic experience.

Fortunately, developers of inclusive curricula for disabled students are keen to disseminate their suggestions as widely as possible, and have made these freely available on the web. For example, Herrington & Simpson (2002) have collected 'exemplars' of assessments that had been successfully designed for disabled students with various impairments. One student with dyslexia was 'asked to choose an area of environmental plant biology and prepare ... A 10 minute radio broadcast with an associated support pack' ('Case Study 12'). Another was asked, as an alternative to a 12-14,000 word dissertation, to reconstruct 'a primitive vertical loom, of a type discussed in the archaeological literature', a project which involved library research, drawing plans and supervising building of the loom, keeping a photo journal, and coming to conclusions which 'would relate back to issues relevant to the archaeology of textiles' ('Case Study 11'). At both the 'Strategies for Creating Inclusive Programmes of Study' (SCIPS) website created by the University of Worcester, and the website of the Disabilities: Academic Resource Tool (DART) Project at Loughborough University, resources include both advice on inclusive teaching and case

studies that enable access to the voices and experiences of students as they negotiate their courses. For a discussion of teaching towards, and assessing by means of, a portfolio and *viva voce*, see Symonds (2006).

Conclusion

Although the guidance offered in the publications and websites above originates in efforts to support disabled students, these are likely to be valuable resources for educators interested in promoting inclusive practices more widely. For students who comprehend and express ideas and information most effectively in modes other than writing – for whatever reason – a wider range of options for learning and demonstrating learning should allow them to achieve a better fit with higher education. At the same time, as I have argued here, it is not enough to think about accommodations in purely mechanical terms. If different modes of learning are to be promoted, it is necessary to be explicit about the intellectual purposes students are to address. It is only when these intellectual purposes are fulfilled that lecturers' reservations are likely to be overcome.

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