

# **Students' reading and writing 'in transition': what lessons can be learnt from a case study of A-levels to university transitions to help enabling educators to 'bridge the gap' into undergraduate study?**

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## **Abstract**

*This paper presents findings from a longitudinal exploration of students' reading and writing 'in transition' from school to university and seeks to make connections with the core work of enabling education around students' language practices. Enabling education offers alternative pathways into higher education for often-marginalised students, whose home discourses often hinder development of the dominant discourses of university. Working from the conceptual space of academic literacies, the study explored students' practices, understandings and feelings around their reading and writing. Two headline findings of the study—that assessment functions as the dominant vehicle driving students' and teachers' practices around, and discourses of, writing and that differences in the way knowledge is packaged and developed at school and university cause significant challenges—are unpicked and applied to the enabling context. Three pedagogical recommendations are offered to enabling educators to help them better support students with their reading and writing 'in transition'.*

## **Introduction**

Facilitating students' movements into higher education (HE) has become a significant focus for researchers and educators alike, with 'transition' a powerful way of conceptualising the movements that students make as they depart from one educational level and arrive in another. In particular, 'the transition from school to university' is a well-trodden path, evident in the growing body of literature that focuses on 'the First Year Experience' (FYE), such as Sally Kift's (2009) 'transition pedagogy', and in the prevalence of 'pathways' in the Australian higher education landscape. However, despite the increased empirical interest in transition, there is an impoverished account of the role and significance of students' language practices (made visible in reading and writing) to their movements into undergraduate study. In addition to this, there has been even less attention paid to what happens with students' language practices in the enabling education context, which offers alternative pathways into undergraduate study, often for 'non-traditional' or marginalised students. While the importance of opening access to such students is widely recognised in policy and practice, the academic discourses that shape the kinds of language that are valued by the academy are less visible. It is the intention of this paper to draw on the reading and writing experiences of a group of students, traced as they moved into undergraduate study, and to find connections with enabling education so as to foreground the central importance of language and its attendant complexities and to make suggestions for pedagogical change in the enabling education context.

The study drawn on in this paper was an exploration of students' reading and writing 'in transition' from A-level (Year 12 equivalent) to university. The study is located in the

academic literacies critical field of inquiry, and is informed by a socially situated view of language and literacy. Following the ethnographic-orientation of academic literacies research, and using a qualitative, longitudinal methodology, this study traced the experiences of 11 students over two-and-a-half years from A-level into the first, then second year of university. This research yielded rich data on the practices, understandings and feelings of the participants around both their language practices and their transitions, and the stories told are characterised by the “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) that such ethnographic inquiries permit. A key strength of this research design is the equitable interest in both levels of education, focusing the lens on what happens at A-level as well as undergraduate and thereby contributing an account of pre-university experiences around language, which has hitherto been underrepresented in the literature. Similarly, scant attention has also been paid to language and transition-related issues in another pre-university context—enabling education—and it is in this niche that this paper is located.

This paper therefore aims to achieve two goals:

1. present key findings of an empirical investigation of students’ transitions with their reading and writing over time;
2. provide language practitioners (those who work as literacies and language support or teachers) and enabling educators (those who hold academic, teaching or professional roles within the enabling education sector) with three suggestions for informing practices, delivery, curriculum development and assessment design.

## **Context**

### *Writing in the UK: A-levels and university*

In the UK, A-levels are the most common tool for selection and are the most common pathway into undergraduate study, although alternative routes into UK HE are also available, including vocational and access pathways for non-traditional students. Within the tightly regulated A-level system, connections between the rigid shape of assessment and students’ reading and writing are rarely made explicit, despite the fundamental role students’ language plays in determining student success. The ‘standards’ of A-level writing are often only made visible once students arrive at university, with the deficit discourse of students’ writing—that students cannot spell or write properly—prevailing. The limitations of A-level (school) writing pedagogy fuel the dominant ‘spoon-feeding’ metaphor (for example, Henry, 2008) which is widely speculated upon in media commentary around the role and shape of A-levels. Public derision of A-levels contributes towards a deficit discourse around students’ university writing (see for critique: Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis & Scott, 2007; Turner, 2011), the underpinning assumptions of which have been pointed to in the literature on students’ writing (Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis, 2001; Turner, 2011), and can be summarised as:

1. Writing is the most legitimate way to demonstrate that learning has taken place;
2. Students ‘cannot write’ when they arrive at university;
3. Language is neutral and transferrable; writing can be taught and then be used for any context/discipline/module/lecturer;
4. If you can learn the rules of writing, you will be successful;
5. Writing is a matter of common sense;
6. Students should know ‘how to write’ when they arrive at university;
7. It is not the responsibility of subject teachers to ‘teach’ students how to write;
8. Students’ writing is a problem that can be ‘fixed’.

The deficit discourse constitutes a significant problem for students writing for both A-level and university because the assumptions that underpin the discourse position students as at fault for perceived deficiencies in their writing. By placing the spotlight on students, the education system and its key stakeholders are shielded from taking responsibility for their role in the way that reading and writing serves to open access to some and closes doors to others.

### *Enabling Education in Australia*

Entry to university is often conceived of as a ritual (Archer, Hutchings, & Ross, 2003; Quinn, 2010) for ‘traditional’ students, who can be defined as straight-from-school entrants. However, a large part of the contemporary political rhetoric and policy around higher education focuses on the widening participation agenda, which is enacted through alternative pathways into HE. In Australia, university-based enabling education is one such pathway offering opportunities for often marginalised groups of students who may have had fractured schooling experiences or have re-entered education after a period of time away from studying. These pathways therefore both facilitate entrance into HE for often-marginalised students and also represent institutional efforts to address social justice and equity issues inherent in the academy (Bennett et al., 2012; Gray & Irwin, 2013). The widening participation agenda has opened access to many students who may have previously been declined entry into, or deferred from HE. However, despite the obvious positives of opening access to HE to a significantly varied student body, the massification of higher education has brought myriad challenges for institutions, academics, and students, and these challenges are arguably more complex in the context of the sociocultural and geographic diversity in the Australian educational landscape. Both empirical work and anecdotal accounts report that this diversity of the student body has required the development of new ways of thinking about how to design, deliver and support learning in HE, especially with core language practices around which all teaching and learning in HE is based.

For students enrolled in enabling programs, participating in the language practices and discourses of higher education can be highly confronting and problematic because of the sometimes jarring differences from their home language and discourses (Northedge, 2003). ‘Non-traditional’ students often have had limited or no exposure to the ways of ‘being, knowing and doing’ (Batchelor, 2008) of higher education, meaning that for these students, the challenges of moving into ‘new’ academic discourses and comfortably inhabiting the identity of ‘university student’ are intensified. In this paper, we argue that the key findings from this particular set of movements between educational contexts (school to university) are relevant also to the enabling sector, albeit with attention to developing academic language and literacies arguably more important at the enabling level.

## **Conceptual framings**

### *Academic literacies*

Academic literacies is an important field of inquiry which foregrounds explorations of academic writing and has particularly strong roots in the UK. It offers a particular methodological and conceptual space to researchers interested in language and literacies, which foregrounds aspects of writing that are largely hidden by more textualist approaches, such as the power of the institution to open and constrain particular texts, practices and epistemologies. Academic literacies also places the writer at the centre of the inquiry, opening spaces for writers’ voices to be heard. With these foci, academic literacies challenges popular assumptions about what writing is and what writing does, and seeks to bring the

writer's voice (emic view) to the researcher's empirical gaze (etic view), thus thickening the data (Geertz, 1973) and providing a rounder, more holistic picture of students' language practices in situ.

### *Transitions*

At its most reductive, transition is conceived of as unitary, ritualised and homogeneous—as signalled in the common phrase 'the transition to university' (for example, Winterson & Russ, 2009; Nelson, Smith & Clarke, 2012). However, a more socially constructivist lens positions transition as complex and individually experienced (Quinn, 2010) and the adoption of this view in empirical explorations of students' movements allows researchers to explore the personal, disciplinary and contextual conditions that create particular *transitions* for individual students. Gale & Parker's (2011) concept of 'transition as development' is particularly relevant to both the conceptual framing of academic literacies and to the findings of this study because of its positioning of transition as a matter of plural trajectories and transformations in students' reading and writing.

### **Methodology**

The study on which the findings and implications for pedagogy presented in this paper are based was a longitudinal inquiry, located in the qualitative–interpretivist paradigm. The research employed an ethnographic design so as to privilege the emic (insider-student-writer) perspective on their practices and processes around writing, and to disrupt the centrality of the text in explorations of students' writing. In order to explore what happens with students' reading and writing over time as they move from pre-university (A-levels in this case) into undergraduate study, 20 students were recruited from three different A-level providers. Of this original group, 11 of them continued with the project in its entirety, from the last year of A-levels through to midway through their second year of undergraduate study. The students self-selected to participate and were studying a range of A-level subjects and continued into seven different disciplines at university. The participants took part in six semi-structured interviews across the two-and-a-half years, and contributed further by offering texts for discussion, 'literacy logs' (snapshot records of daily reading and writing) and participating in ad-hoc interviewing in-between and after the formal interviews took place. The participants' Facebook status updates that pertained to their reading and writing were also collected (see Baker, 2013 for detailed discussion of the use of Facebook as research tool, data and context).

This paper will briefly introduce the headline findings of this research before making three suggestions for changes to pedagogical practice directed primarily at enabling educators, but which will also have relevance for teachers in other pre-university contexts.

### **Findings**

The study resulted in two 'headline findings': firstly that assessment is the dominant driver for academic reading and writing; and secondly that the way knowledge is treated changes markedly between the two educational levels. It is from these findings that the pedagogical implications for enabling educators offered in this paper are drawn.

#### *Assessment is the dominant driver for academic reading and writing*

Analysis of the participants' talk around their texts and of their teachers' feedback strongly suggests that assessment is a dominant shaping force for the ways that students 'do' and

understand their academic reading and writing, particularly at A-levels. Indeed, assessment appears to run as a common thread through the participants' experiences of academic reading and writing, originating in early schooling and guiding students towards a set of routine practices and beliefs that inform their academic writing. The majority of the A-level writing that the participants offered and discussed was written for the purpose of practising for exams, often under exam conditions (timed practice). The primacy of assessment, in both formative and summative forms, has resulted in a system described by Torrance (2007) as *assessment for learning*, whereby assessment is "interpreted very narrowly, with an overwhelming focus on criteria compliance and award achievement" (2007: 282). Most of the writing that the participants described doing for their A-level studies was either exam practice 'essays' or 'short-answers', so much so that one student described her writing in terms of, "everything we're doing at the moment is exam practice". Coursework was another type of assessed writing that the participants reported for some subjects (Chemistry, History, English Literature, English Language); there was relatively little discussion or textual evidence of non-assessed writing, although this may be a result of the research design (see Baker, 2015).

However, despite its dominance, some of the participants were openly critical of the inescapable focus of assessment, particularly in the A-level system. Henry made derogatory comments about what he viewed as an 'exam training' model of learning at A-levels, whereby writing was a vehicle for exam practice and training for the 'hit the marks' system. In Henry's view, "we're too focused on exams; we don't bother to do the learning properly". James felt that A-levels privileged and perpetuated a particular way of thinking and writing (mediated through the focused lens of assessment objectives and past exam papers), thereby eliminating any opportunities to, in James's words, "move on to the higher level of reasoning". For James, taking an original line of argument in his A-level subjects "would have been a huge risk to take in the exam". Unsurprisingly then, risk was markedly absent from the participants' A-level experience.

At university, while the types of reading and writing diversified substantially, assessment remained a dominant force for the kinds of language valued and the ways of doing, being and knowing enacted through reading and writing. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given its prominence at A-level, assessment remained conspicuous, as can be seen in the participants' descriptions of what they considered to be 'unsuccessful' writing. Key examples of the assessment focus are included here:

*Evan: ['Successful' writing is] I think getting good marks mostly... [and] I suppose if I was happy with it really and thought I had done a good job.*

Interview Extract 1: Year 1, university—my emphasis

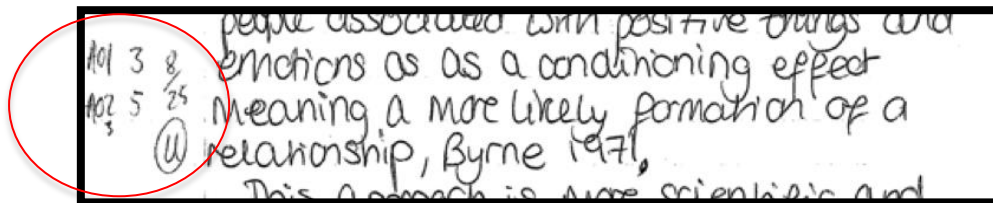
*Henry: ['Unsuccessful' writing is] A limited response to the set question or topic at hand, which engages little with existing theoretical or critical approaches, **does not meet the set requirements**, and does little or nothing to offer any real insight into the question.*

Interview Extract 2: Year 1, university—my emphasis

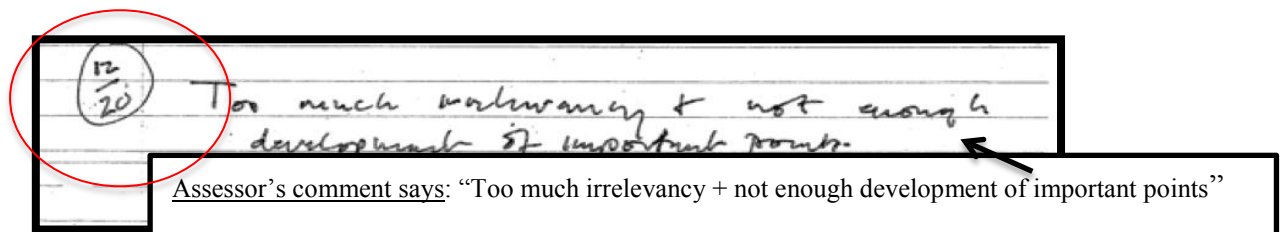
In contrast to the absence of risk in writing for A-level, the writing criteria for university required a qualitatively different engagement with knowledge as the participants were expected to develop their own understandings and ideas, to work with the knowledge of others, to treat existing knowledge as support for their own ideas rather than reporting the work of others, to take risks and be creative. For some of the participants, this

epistemological shift created significant problems with their transitions to becoming a confident university student.

A-level teachers' feedback on the participants' assessed writing provided insights into how the participants' teachers viewed writing. Much of the feedback on the students' texts was closely linked to assessment, often giving calculations of marks according to assessment criteria as seen in Figures 1 and 2. Sometimes these calculations were supported by text (Figure 2), but more often they stood alone at the end of the text or squashed into the margin, (Figure 1).



**Figure 1: Summative feedback in the margin of Maggie's A-level Psychology writing (site 1), highlighting by researcher**



**Figure 2: Summative feedback on Andrew's A-level Economics writing (site 3), highlighting by researcher**

Compared with the quantitative calculation of marks and strategic use of Assessment Objective (AO) codes in the A-level texts, feedback at university is generally more verbose and draws on a wider range of criteria than A-level assessment does. In Figure 3, an extract of feedback is offered, taken from Henry's Psychology assignment (Year 1). In this feedback, we can see how the assessor directly addresses Henry with the pronoun 'you', such as "I like the fact that you give specific examples ..." in the 'Comments on this work' section. Immediately, this intended dialogue contrasts markedly with the reductive and monologic feedback offered to the students at A-level. However, it is worth noting that the closeness of relationships that the students had with their A-level and with their university assessors was significantly different; there were more opportunities for face-to-face feedback with A-level teachers than with university lecturers, suggesting that the static feedback offered on A-level work was part of a text-talk dialogue. If this is the case, it might contribute to the move to university writing and feedback being experienced as profoundly different and therefore challenging for students.

Comments on this work	Feed forward – how could a student improve?
<p>A wide range of reference material, including three contemporary journal articles.            Very good intro, too. Avoid use of the word 'I' in standard academic essays (always write in the third person, instead) and perhaps add in how you intend to structure your answer.            Fine conclusion, too. I like the fact that you give specific examples where research is required, rather than some vague 'further research is needed' statement.</p>	<p>To get an even higher mark next time:  <b>Aim for at least 12 journal articles from 2001 onwards, to ensure that you are drawing upon the most up-to-date and defensible thinking in the topic about which you are writing.</b>            Ensure you directly address the essay question throughout.            For example, you do not really 'critically consider' the first factor. Instead you talk about examples of individual problems – well, one example, really. Every part of your essay <b>must</b> transparently relate to the question set, else it is not really adding value and picking up marks for you.            This approach is replicated across each of the four factors. For an even higher mark, perhaps also consider the model as a whole – are these really four discrete factors? How do we know there are only four? What other, competing, theoretical frameworks exist? What are the relative merits/drawbacks of each? This would also help your main analysis of each of the factors.</p>

**Figure 3: An extract of the feedback that Henry received on a Psychology assignment — highlighting by researcher (Year 1)**

*Shifts in the treatment of knowledge*

At the centre of the differences between A-levels and university described by the participants is a significant disparity in what is considered valid knowledge between the two levels. A key distinction made by the participants in terms of their writing for A-levels was the difference between unassessed writing, writing for coursework and writing for exams. The high-risk nature of formally assessed writing appeared to shape the ways that the students engaged with writing for their A-levels. In contrast, the high value given by the academy to more diverse forms of knowledge, seen in the range of resources—books, journal articles, disciplinary websites—contrasts markedly with the conceptualisation and production of knowledge at A-level as an atomised and containable entity. Moreover, similar to other work (Lea & Jones, 2011), the data suggests that students continue to rely on the authority of the institution—visible in module guides, reading lists and the guidance of their teachers—to direct how they access and utilise resources, even though the independent finding of knowledge is highly valued at university, so much so that it features as part of the assessment criteria. In Figure 4—an extract from an assessment matrix used by Kate’s ‘English Language Studies Workshop’ (Year 1), ‘originality’ and ‘knowledge’ are two of seven criteria against which Kate’s work was assessed. From these two criteria, it is clear that knowledge is positioned as central and expansive: something to be critically engaged with, something that requires independent positioning, something ‘excellent’ and ‘relevant’ for understanding the topic at hand. This contrasts markedly with the treatment of knowledge at A-levels.

The differences in how knowledge is packaged and accessed between A-level and university appeared to present particular challenges for the participants as they embarked on their degree studies, especially with regards reading. This resonates with other work that has highlighted how students’ expectations and experiences of reading are qualitatively different, and cause transition-related issues as a result (Smith, 2004; Smith & Hopkins, 2005; Baker, 2015).

Modules. These are guidelines only)

Originality	Knowledge
Distinctive work, showing independent thought and critical engagement with alternative views.	Makes effective use of an excellent knowledge and thorough understanding of relevant material.
May contain some distinctive or independent thinking; may begin to formulate an independent position.	A substantial knowledge of relevant material, showing clear grasp of themes, questions and issues therein.
Sound work which expresses a personal position only in broad terms and in uncritical conformity to one or more standard views of the topic.	Adequate knowledge of a fair range of relevant material, with intermittent evidence of an appreciation of its significance.
Largely derivative; no personal view is adequately formed.	Basic understanding of a limited range of material.
Insufficient evidence of personal thought.	Lack of basic knowledge necessary for understanding of the topic.

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**Figure 4: ‘Originality’ and ‘Knowledge’ as assessment criteria in undergraduate English Literature**

### Implications for practitioners in the enabling context

Having outlined the three main findings that emerged from analysis of the data, it is clear that issues circulating around assessment and epistemology dominated these students’ experiences of moving into undergraduate study. So what can enabling educators take from these findings, given the complexities of working with ‘non-traditional’ students who are likely to have had any or all of the following: unsuccessful prior educational experiences, a fragmented education, be the first in family to enter higher education, speak a language other than English at home, be juggling multiple responsibilities, or live a significant distance away from campus? Here, three main recommendations are presented to enabling educators to inform their teaching, curriculum development and assessment design.

1. Develop and sustain pathways of meaningful dialogue between enabling educators and the faculties, with regards to the kinds of language, texts and assessments that are valued

Firstly, it is likely that disconnects in practices from A-levels to university are also problematic for students studying in enabling programs, probably more so than for ‘traditional’ students who move ‘seamlessly’ from school to university. Therefore, it is imperative that enabling educators, particularly in programs that are packaged as disciplinary courses, are engaged in sustained dialogue with their colleagues in the disciplinary faculties so as to promote understanding of what both levels are doing, what is valued and what ‘counts’. It is not enough for enabling educators to rest on their past experiences as students of their disciplines, as is arguably the case for A-level/Year 12 teachers; indeed, this is especially pertinent in the context of working with students who require a different pedagogical approach compared to undergraduate students. Instead, a sustained commitment to dialogue between enabling teachers and faculty teachers can help enabling educators to



design the reading and writing requirements according to the kinds of tasks, texts and practices valued at undergraduate but at an appropriate level to ensure that students in enabling programs are offered low-stakes opportunities to practice engaging in new academic discourses.

2. Develop working partnerships with language practitioners to ensure that required reading and writing tasks and practices are comprehensible, possible and equitable and seek to unpick and understand own understandings of what ‘good’ writing is and develop a metalanguage for explaining this to students

The second suggestion addresses a core concern expressed by academic literacies researchers: opening access to academic discourses mediated through language. This body of work, to which this paper contributes, seeks to place language at the centre of educational endeavours and move away from unhelpfully reductive views of language—as a transparent and neutral set of practices—that inhibit students’ ‘possibilities for selfhood’ (Ivanič, 1998) and fuel the deficit discourses. This dominant positioning of language can be disrupted if individual teachers are helped to address their own understandings of language and writing—what constitutes ‘good’ writing, how they perceive language, how their personal epistemologies and disciplinary orientation position language and writing in particular ways and how those might contrast with other disciplines. For enabling educators, this concern with unpicking assumptions and beliefs about language is doubly important; unlike ‘traditional’ students who move directly into university after A-levels/Year 12, students in enabling programs might be returning to education after long periods of time with no engagement with academic reading and writing. Moreover, if they have had negative past educational experiences, they are likely to have struggled with language (primarily writing) under a heavy assessment agenda. To truly ‘do justice’ to these students, ideas about language and its potential to open and constrain particular ways of being, knowing and doing need to be unpicked, understood and utilised in terms of what texts students are expected to read and write, what kinds of knowledge they are expected to engage with and how much support is necessary to assist them. At all points, language practitioners are best placed to support and guide both enabling educators and students because they view course materials and assessment items through the lens of language, rather than the lens of the discipline. This could be, therefore, a fruitful partnership, as can be seen in examples of such connections in the academic literacies literature (for example, Mitchell & Evison, 2006).

3. Look for the happy medium with assessment: to be congruent with undergraduate practices but no assessed writing without careful consideration and an iron-tight rationale

Finally, the insidious and pervasive influence of assessment on both students and teachers must be acknowledged, as evidenced in the findings of the study discussed in this paper. Assessment is a cornerstone of the western educational system, and a necessary quarter of what constitutes curriculum (along with content, teaching and learning, and organisation; Knight, 2001). However, instead of sharing an equal 25 per cent of the pie, assessment appears to take over students’ (and possibly some teachers’) views of what language is for and how reading and writing should be done. The research discussed here strongly suggests that this originates in school, where it is highly visible, and is transported into students’ conceptions of writing at university in ways that are often unhelpful, especially for less-confident students. Given that enabling education is positioned as an ‘alternative’ pathway into university study, reducing the explicit and prescriptive reliance on assessment criteria as ways of discussing and understanding what is needed and what counts with academic reading

and writing is advisable, and could prevent the creation of high stakes situations through ill-considered summative assessment or ambiguous assessment design and criteria. Instead, formative assessment with multiple feedback loops in-built would better serve these students, helping them to develop experience, confidence and understandings of what knowledge is valid, what reading broadly and independently means and why it is important, and what kinds of writing practices they will need to engage with.

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