

**Developing Student-Centred Metacognitive Parameters for Writing Feedback**

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This short study aims to consider how educators might help students to develop metacognitive skills in their writing. Many studies demonstrate that metacognitive skills – in other words, the ability to think about thinking – are strongly correlated with academic success. Yet often, such studies understand metacognition reductively, as a student's general awareness of the overall quality of their work, as reflected by a grade. How can educators help students to develop metacognitive awareness of their writing process in their own terms, by paying attention to the singularities and subtleties of their thought, and their creative process as writers? A structured interview of first year Goldsmiths BA (Hons) Fine Art students aimed to identify what factors impacted how, and whether, students were able to develop student-centered metacognitive parameters to understand their writing processes. The interview revealed how excellent writers make the essay material their own, trust their instincts as to what is important, and consciously enter into dialogue with other thinkers as they engage in the writing process. It also revealed that students' self-assessment of their strengths and weaknesses in academic writing was coloured by their self-perception as classed subjects. In other words, students who may have had a harder time believing that they belonged in higher education, perhaps due to their self-perceived class position, tended to underestimate their writing abilities; and this had the potential to hinder their writing experience. These findings support an approach to teaching metacognitive writing skills that emphasizes how a student might understand their writing process according to the experience of immersing oneself in – and contributing to – a rich dialogue of ideas and debates that extends beyond their own thinking.

*Key Words: academic writing, metacognition, writing process, teaching, writing skills*

**Background and Purpose**

As an educator committed to teaching writing to Fine Art students, I am often confronted with the challenge of how to help art students excel at the fundamentals of essay writing (including analytical skills, structuring skills, argumentation skills, and writing skills), while also acknowledging and developing the singularity of their strengths as thinkers. This challenge is all the more urgent in Fine Art critical studies contexts due to both the general anxiety that surrounds writing for many art students, and the immense diversity of thinking styles on Fine Art courses. Upon entering a BA degree, Fine Art students can vary greatly in their degree of inclination toward writing. While some are exceptionally articulate, original thinkers, and relish the challenge of staging and constructing an argument, others may have come to a Fine Art studio course in part because they prefer to take a more hands-on approach to learning – to think through engaging with materials. For these students (as I have seen in my classrooms many times), writing can seem a daunting task. Indeed, some feel quite intimidated at the thought of submitting a paper, as if they had somehow received the message that they were “no good” at it in the past. Thus, part of my job is to lay the groundwork for a positive engagement with writing, which will help students to recognize their strengths as thinkers, enjoy the process of constructing an argument, feel acknowledged as singular thinkers, and further understand their own creative process as writers.

The latter involves developing their own strategies for addressing the challenges they encounter in writing.

A key tool in this regard is to link the teaching of writing skills to the teaching of metacognitive skills. Many studies correlate strong metacognitive skills (in other words, the ability to think about thinking, and to monitor one's cognitive processes) with academic success. For instance, Tobias and Everson (2002) find a correlation between knowledge monitoring accuracy and intellectual ability. Similarly, Isaacson and Fujita (2006) note that expert learners excel at metacognitive knowledge monitoring. They are aware of their strengths and weaknesses as learners, and their confidence levels adjust in keeping with their actual abilities. In their study, Isaacson and Fujita gave weekly tests, each comprised of 40 objective test questions, to 84 undergraduate education students. Before the tests, they asked the students to report how many hours they had studied, what grade they would have to achieve in order to feel satisfied with their performance, what grade they would have to achieve to feel proud of their performance, and how confident they were that they could achieve the grade that would leave them satisfied. After the test, but before it was graded, the researchers asked students to predict their grade and determine how likely it was that they had achieved their satisfaction goal. These results were correlated to the students' performance on the tests, and a positive correlation was found between the accuracy of students' predictions and their level of academic success.

This study was designed, in part, to compensate for a lack of empirical studies in metacognitive knowledge monitoring (MCM). This is, of course, a laudable aim; however, by rendering MCM in purely quantifiable terms through comparing projected with actual grades, such a study also, arguably, paints a very limited picture of what metacognitive knowledge monitoring skills might look like. Since the tests are administered by those running the study, they do not reflect the full range of metacognitive knowledge monitoring in fully self-directed learning contexts (even though the students could choose which questions they could answer in certain areas; see Isaacson and Fujita 2006, p. 44). Further, to ask students to predict their grades is to ask them to use the languages of standardised assessment to describe themselves. Of course, grades, and the ability to predict them, can be helpful as general indicators of learning levels and writing success. However, to teach to equality in the Rancièrian sense (1991) is to transcend the language of grading and honour the singularity of each student's thought process. For instance, two students who receive the same grade on their essay may have attained the same general level of achievement, yet still have vastly different strengths, weaknesses, thought processes, cadences in their writing, and subtleties in their analysis. The greatest researchers, thinkers and writers can exquisitely describe what it is like to be immersed in their research and thought. They monitor their knowledge metacognitively, using complex, nuanced images and spatial metaphors, which extend their cognitive processes in highly singular ways. The grade is a tool for general understanding, but also a bureaucratic artefact. As such, it will be forever inadequate to speak to this deep sense of immersion in thought about thinking. As David Graeber argues, "In practice, bureaucratic procedure invariably means ignoring all the subtleties of real social existence and reducing everything to preconceived mechanical or statistical formulae" (2012, p. 119). As educators, how can we encourage students to understand their creativity as writers in their own language, to reflect on their thought in their own language?

### Procedure

My study aimed to examine how students might describe their writing process on their own terms, and to encourage participating students to reflect on their development as writers in a singular way – focusing on the minute, qualitative dimensions of their thought rather than a grade reflecting global levels of achievement. This took the form of a structured interview, designed as an extension of, and a reflection on, my essay tutorials for first year BA Fine Art Critical Studies students at Goldsmiths. In my essay preparation and feedback tutorials (given prior to the structured interview), I aimed to speak as specifically to the experience of immersion in the student's thought-world as I can. I sought to acknowledge students' strengths and encourage them to go further using as many different kinds of descriptions, analyses, verbal cues and non-verbal cues (such as hand gestures delineating spatial representations of the students' thought patterns). In order to examine the efficacy of this approach in helping students develop their own metacognitive parameters through which they could understand their writing (and, more broadly, to get a

sense of how they understood the qualitative singularities of their own thought), I wanted to see how they would describe these sorts of observations for themselves after the feedback tutorials had been completed. The structured interview I designed was handed to two different groups of first year BA (Hons) Fine Art Critical Studies students at three different points. The first round was given as a pilot test at the end of the Spring 2014 term, after the 2013-2014 students had received their feedback tutorial for their second term essay. The second was in February 2015, after the 2014-2015 students had received their feedback tutorials on their first term essay. A third round was distributed in May 2015, after this same group of students had received feedback on their final spring term essay. The interview questions were as follows:

1. Describe your writing process. What is it like for you to write? What drives you as a writer? Which parts of the process are most enjoyable? Most difficult?
2. During individual writing tutorials (or seminars), what kinds of descriptions of the writing process came up in conversation? Did any of these influence how you understand your own writing process, or prompt you to think about writing in a different way? If so, explain how.
3. Did any part of the conversations during the individual tutorials or seminars help you to tailor your writing process to better suit your strengths and challenges as a writer or researcher? If so, please explain.
4. How did your understanding of the essay writing processes change over the past year? In what ways have you developed as a writer since you began studying at Goldsmiths?

These questions were designed, on the one hand, to learn something of how students described their process so that I could expand on the way that I addressed them as singular writers; and, on the other hand, to actively contribute to students' learning process, giving them an opportunity to vividly situate themselves within the field of writing.

## Results

To the first question about writing process, respondents gave detailed accounts of various aspects of their process, including analyses of their experiences of first encountering the essay question and balancing the demands of research and writing. They discussed how they got themselves in the right frame of mind for writing, and how they addressed the complicated balance between building up material and then whittling it down again into a concise piece of argumentation. Introductions and conclusions were cited as particularly difficult tasks, as was the challenge of balancing research with one's own writing. Respondents also addressed the fragile point in the process when the writer is not yet "grounded," and does not know what she will be arguing yet. One excellent writer, T., described how she needed to navigate the question in order to make it her own:

First of all, I repeat the question a lot. I try to interpret it in a way that makes sense to me; not necessarily what I think I am being asked to say. I try to have a clear understanding of how the question could be interpreted in different ways, so that I can start to decide which way I might want to go with it... I also stick to what I find interesting, and try to figure out why I find it is interesting, as that usually helps me to develop my argument... I think the main thing for me is finding material that really excites me, and also material that really aggravates me. I need to feel like I am arguing against something that really matters, and is not being said in exactly the same way, or at all. Like a mixture between... forming a strong opinion and piecing together a puzzle (T., 2014).

This response suggests that excellent writers have the confidence, critical thinking skills and self-awareness to understand and honour their own perspective on the material, and to trust their sense of what is important to write about. It speaks to the process through which strong writers situate themselves within a field of other ideas and thinkers.

Among responses I received to the second question about strengths and challenges, respondents tended to place strengths in the language of enjoyment and immersion. They also tended to frame weaknesses in aspirational tones, describing a skill as if it were just out of reach. Yet in some cases, these descriptions of the respondents' challenges as writers were intertwined with complex language that reflected the student's self-perception as a classed subject, and not just

the writing process itself. For instance, another very strong writer, E., wrote: “I also believe my grammar isn’t as wide as some of my peers... and having lived in South London all my life I have developed a back-to-front sentence structure (haha) which sometimes comes across in my essay writing. I should really try and improve on this too.” In this case, the writer’s comment did not match my assessment of her skill set; her self-perception had caused her to judge her skills too low. This suggests that self-assessment of strengths and weaknesses in writing reflect not only the skills a student has, but also the complexities of self-perception; how the student sees herself strongly influences how she might assess her skill set.

Among the responses I received to the third question about essay feedback tutorials, respondents noted that they learned more about what was being asked of them in the assignment; about the importance of the thesis statement/argument; about structuring their essays; about where they might find inspiration for their writing, and about learning which information, research and ideas to prioritize. For instance, G. remarked that she learned “To look at successful writers and consider how they structure their work and ideas to be more cohesive and persuasive.” A. remarked, “Quite possibly the most important tip I have been given this year is that I should prioritize my sources. This has helped me reach clarity with my thoughts and build a less overwhelming foundation for thinking.” T. wrote, “The emphasis you made in the seminars on the thesis statement, and the ‘road-map’, really helped me to progress with my writing. It reminded me the importance of having an argument, and really knowing what it is that the essay is dealing with.” Many of the responses emphasized the tools that helped students to situate themselves more effectively within a field of ideas, to judge what was important to their argument and what was less so, and to form a clearer position.

In responses to the fourth question, about how their understanding of writing has changed since entering their BA studies at Goldsmiths, some respondents said that they had learned to more effectively understand how to more powerfully locate and build upon their interests as thinkers. For instance, T. wrote, “What really changed for me was when I started to let go of what I thought I was being asked to do, but instead focused on working out what I really enjoy and am interested in. It has definitely helped me as well to really think about it as a form of art, rather than a formal, rigid aspect of getting a pass mark.” A. wrote, “It has been challenged and though this, deepened. I feel I have a better understanding of the importance of research and also the importance of balancing between retaining a personal voice and referencing researchers.”

## Conclusion

Students participating in this study had a chance to actively contribute to their metacognitive skills, reflecting on their ideas, singularities, strengths and challenges as thinkers and writers. Their responses demonstrated their increasing awareness of their participation in a broader learning community of thinkers and learners. By analyzing how they described their process, I learned valuable ways to help students maximize their writing potential, by helping them build the confidence and skills to have a rewarding and unfettered sense of immersion in the writing process. Excellent writers who participated in my study greatly emphasized the importance of understanding the assignment on their own terms, and approaching the topic in a way that felt urgent and important to them. Yet some of their responses demonstrated how closely linked self-assessment was with self-identification as a de-privileged, racialized, classed and/or gendered subject. This suggests that some students may need help in “letting go” of their self-judgments based on personal identity; helping to refocus these students’ attention onto what they believe is the most urgent or important in the material they are studying may help with this. In light of this finding, I have increased the emphasis I place on each student’s skills in listening to what is really important to him/her as a thinker. A recent study by Schippers, Scheepers and Peterson (2015; Kamenetz 2015) suggests that “self-authoring” – in other words, focusing students’ attention on how they might identify their own educational goals in their own terms (for instance, by completing writing exercises that encourage goal-setting and reflection on what the student wishes to achieve and how they might do so) can dramatically increase academic performance, and can even erase the performance gap between minority and/or underprivileged students and majority students, caused by the “stereotype threat... the damaging belief that generalizations about ethnic-group academic performance will apply to them personally” (Kamenetz 2015). By introducing exercises to help students more effectively identify their interests,

goals and concerns alongside my already highly singular methods for addressing each student's strengths and weaknesses as writers, I hope to help as many students as I can to develop a confident sense of the importance of their own intellectual concerns. This can directly improve their writing, their self-understanding as singular thinkers, and their sense that they can contribute to ongoing critical debates in contemporary art.

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