

## Mrs Mop Does Magic

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### Abstract

*In this article we explore the relationship between study support teachers and those teaching on courses. Our focus is on the UK but we believe our findings to have wider relevance. Writing practitioners are part of the academy, not separate from it, and we need to understand and theorize the relationships between our own community and our course teacher colleagues. We regard the perceptions we have of each other as important because student learning is helped by a productive, co-operative and collaborative relationship between study support teachers and course teachers. The latter communicate with students both explicitly and implicitly their views on study support. Relationships between these groups of teachers are likely to be improved by an understanding of the views and prejudices we have of each other and their origins (Blythman and Orr 2003).*

### Introduction

«We make ourselves up with the information we construct about ourselves» (Ball 2001)

In this article we explore the relationship between study support teachers and those teaching on courses. Our focus is on the UK but we believe our findings to have wider relevance. Writing practitioners are part of the academy, not separate from it, and we need to understand and theorize the relationships between our own community and our course teacher colleagues. We regard the perceptions we have of each other as important because student learning is helped by a productive, co-operative and collaborative relationship between study support teachers and course teachers. The latter communicate with students both

explicitly and implicitly their views on study support. Relationships between these groups of teachers are likely to be improved by an understanding of the views and prejudices we have of each other and their origins (Blythman and Orr 2003).

Both are academic discourse communities who create themselves through talk, formal and informal and through shared use of metaphor (Hewings 2001) as well as practices (Wenger 1998). Current literature on study support teaching is mainly the US literature on writing centers and tends to focus on our worthiness. Thus «sanctified writing center folk» (Carino 1992, p. 39) adopted a «posture of victimisation» (Carino 2001, p. xi). The writing centre was modelled as pure; the academy impure. The literature reminds us that

students come to the writing centre with stories about how «they're traumatised by their departments. It's like they've been beaten up by their department» (Leverenz 2001, p. 57).

We argue that, with a mature conceptualisation of ourselves as professionals and a need to move away from binaries, it is time to explore the other side rather than see the relationship as one of «goodies and baddies.» We need to recognise a dialectical relationship where we construct them and they construct us through an iterative process.

#### «It's easy for them....»

In this section we offer a series of illustrative stereotypes that are representative of the ways that we view course teachers and the ways we perceive that they view us. These are drawn from our experience and from interviews that we have conducted in earlier research (Blythman and Orr 2003; Orr 2002). However, we have never explicitly asked them this question for reasons outlined later and so we are reporting our perceptions. These form the hidden knowledge of our community and are echoed when we talk to each other at conferences, in study centres and in our electronic discussion groups. It is worth noting that this conversation stretches across the Atlantic, despite a myriad of other systemic differences.

#### **Us (study support teachers) on them (course teachers)**

**We think that course teachers lack appreciation of student diversity and tend to have stereotyped, categorical views of students such as international students.**

This conceptualisation of the student lacks texture. Both home and international students emerge as (separate) monolithic groups.

**But:** We have to concede that course teachers manage very large numbers of students and so opportunities for course teachers to build up a rich picture of the students they teach are very limited. We are privileged in that we still have pedagogic opportunities to get to know our students. We cannot, therefore, be critical of course teachers, who, due to imposed working practices, are unable to get to know students individually. Perceptions, through structural and funding arrangements in higher education, of international students simply as a source of institutional income exacerbates such categorical models.

**We think that we are student centred and we contrast this to the teacher centred models**

#### **adopted by course teachers.**

Early US writing centre literature created the stereotype of the traditional didactic class room teacher, perhaps in part to contrast and construct our pedagogy, but this is over simplistic and we need to allow for pluralism in respect of pedagogic practices for both communities. The fear of being teacherly with students in study support settings could serve to disadvantage students who need explicit teaching in order to progress.

Harbord (2003) argues that Bruffee's construction of the typical classroom assumes a critical stance towards the course teacher which is now outmoded. It is too simplistic for us to say that course teachers are «head filers» who adopt transmission models and that in contrast we are student centred. Our own research suggests that whilst our study support colleagues adopt the rhetoric of student centeredness, their practices can be just as teacher centred as course teachers.

**We think that course teachers don't write clearly and elitist tendencies encourage them to show off rather than foregrounding accessibility.**

As a result, the assignments and written feedback given to students are often poor. Course teachers may base their pedagogy on their own student learning experiences of UK universities when 14 % of the population were admitted into university and the resultant pedagogy reflected this elitism.

**BUT:** This is the dominant culture of university and course teachers risk accusations of dumbing down or spoon-feeding if they challenge this view.

We think they lack sensitivity in their dealings with students

This is evidenced in the careless comments, the throwaway remarks and negative feedback without encouragement that students share with us in study support settings.

**BUT:** The intensification of working practices erodes the opportunities for thoughtful communication. It is easier for us to talk in positive, encouraging ways to students, this is an in built part of our culture, it is very gendered, maybe we care too much, maybe our mothering is problematic. Perhaps we can be accused of creating a dependency culture.

#### **Them (course teachers) on us (study support teachers) from our standpoint**

We now turn to how we think course teachers perceive study support teachers. The following section explores how we construct how course teachers construct us. We did not ask for their constructions for several

reasons. First, we feared collegial politeness, second, we consider much of this construction to be tacit and unrecognised and finally what matters is what we *think* they think of us because our perceptions construct our social world.

**We think they see us as all round dogbodies, as Mrs Mop for the students that are beneath them.**

Our research (Orr and Blythman 1999) elicited some examples of our status in the eyes of some course teachers:

Essay writing skills? I haven't got the time. (p. 207)

They (study support teachers) are dealing with the things I haven't got time to deal with in my lessons (ibid.)

Course teachers have a huge number of competing demands placed on them and increased bureaucracy created by the audit culture (Power 1994). In this context it is unsurprising that they carve out areas where they think that there are others that can do the job for them.

**But** to what extent are we complicit? There is no denying that we do pick up some work that would have been done by others (or wouldn't have needed to be done anyway due to selection and exclusion). We pride ourselves on our flexibility, availability and helpfulness. When course teachers had fewer essays to mark they were able to induct students more fully into the writing expectations of the discipline (via tutorial, comments on drafts, written feedback, numbers of essays written and marked)

**We also think that, paradoxically, course teachers also see study support as magic, able to carry out a transformatory quick fix even with complex language problems.**

**But** they are not language teachers and this is a good example of reciprocity: We expect too much of them and they, in return, expect too much of us. We perceive them as having uni-dimensional concepts of language:

*I'm looking to see if they know the subject matter: the focus is on the content. (Respondent cited in Orr and Blythman 1999 p. 205)*

It could be seem as rather flattering that they think we can have such a huge impact on students' English levels! However, it also means that we are doomed to fail so it is a very important myth to quash (via staff development and dialogue) .

**Our perception is that they think it's easy for us, all we have to do is 1:1 teaching – they teach huge groups. They consider our workload less demanding.**

**BUT:** This assumes that one to one teaching is all we do. We also have group work, staff development, external consultancy and other responsibilities. Additionally 1:1 has an intensity all of its own and can be physically and emotionally draining. But this may be our fault since we allow the personal element into the teaching context.

A huge group can be taught as a monolith (for example a lecture). The levels of paperwork required for our study support work are immense. Our own experience is that a whole day of 1:1 is more exhausting than a whole day of group teaching. Groups take on an energy of their own; the teacher is not always the focus.

We perceive them as thinking we don't know their subjects and should steer clear of content. We should teach how to write not what to write, that's their job. We should stick to grammar and spelling sessions

**BUT:** This is a tension within our community as well. We want it all ways, able to help any student but also having subjects that we feel comfortable with. There are comfort zones of subject areas that we feel able to work in. For subject teachers, their subject knowledge is their career capital and they need to feel that it is more important than language features. This split is underpinned by study skills text books that dichotomise subject and content. The issue of whether or not «we are all language teachers» has a long history in the UK (Bullock report 1975; Simpson 1996). «Language across the curriculum» models have been largely replaced by skills model of literacy development. HE in the UK is predicated on the notion of teachers having a subject specialism.

We think that they think we mollycoddle the students, it's unfair, this is cheating and it spoils the students. We act like mummy, a shoulder to cry on.

**BUT:** An understanding of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1997) means that students arrive at university with a wide range of disadvantages and advantages, about which we know little. Some have computers at home, parents who help with homework, a private school education whilst others are the first in their family to attend university. If universities recruit disadvantaged students and do not support them, then we are setting up students to fail (Blythman and Orr 2002). Study support provision is open to all. This means that students are able to avail themselves of the opportunity to use this facility. This is an attempt to offer equality of opportunity not the opposite.

However we have to recognise the gendered nature of this kind of role and the emotional labour involved (Morley 1998). Our research elicited such self-images

from study support teachers as «being a bossy mum», «patience, ability to listen».

### **We think they view us as helping students, not teaching.**

In USA, the writing center community doesn't like to talk about teaching, but in the UK this is less of an issue. In the UK the Stephen North paper (1995) about the role of writing centers as fixin' shops is not the seminal work that it is in the States, so there is no anxiety about whether or not we actually teach. Study support teachers are mainly faculty.

I am kind of shaping and forming and also, if I'm honest, doing a bit of teaching. (Research respondent quoted in Orr 2002)

However just because we think we teach doesn't mean that this is how our work is viewed by others. The pedagogic issue is exacerbated by college structures. In some contexts our study support colleagues are on non-academic contracts and work in student services. Many teachers do not view a 1:1 tutorial as a teaching situation so teaching as a term tends to correlate with group approaches.

### **Part Two**

In the second part of this chapter we explore these findings through three theoretical lenses. These are models of pedagogy, structural constraints and micropolitical responses.

#### **Models of pedagogy**

In the UK there are currently competing models of pedagogy operating in higher education. However one can be seen as dominant and another as residual (Williams 1989). It is worth noting that this dominant/residual status is at the level of policy and discourse. Many UK faculty still *practise* the residual model. The residual model is based on transmission of large amounts of propositional knowledge, has a focus on teaching rather than learning and is sometimes expressed as a «sorting» model (Dore 1997) where the purpose of education is seen as the measurement of students against pre-set standards to decide inclusion or exclusion from the academy. This model grew up in times where UK higher education was explicitly for an elite. This is sometimes known colloquially as the Darwinian model. Course teachers who hold this model are suspicious of any significant levels of individual help as somehow cheating the objective tests of worthiness.

Some features of study support teachers' position

comes from this model. We are Mrs Mop; we do not have a large body of propositional knowledge. As a sociologist once said to one of us:

We have Marxism; you have spelling.

Profession trait theorists share a view that professionals have and create bodies of knowledge that serve to mark their position (Downie 1990, Palvalko 1988). Burns (1999) and Grimm (1999) both recognise that writing centre directors are not viewed as knowledge makers. Writing is not viewed as a discipline in any traditional sense of the word by anyone other than the community themselves. Even writing centre commentators admit that writing centre expertise is hard to define (Carino 2001).

However things are changing and the current dominant UK model has much more focus on learning, as opposed to teaching. It dominates current teacher training courses for higher education and has a wide literature (Biggs 1999; Gibbs 1992; Prosser and Trigwell 1999; Ramsden 1992) with a focus on the scholarship of teaching (Trigwell et al. 2000). The intellectual origins of this model are in the work of Marton and Saljo (1976) and Entwistle (1987) with phenomenographic studies of students' approaches to learning. A second conceptual source is that of the reflective practitioner (Schon 1987). Its proponents identify this as a move from Mode I to Mode 2 knowledge, moving from teaching to learning, more student centred, demand driven and focusing on problem solving and performance (Ramsden 2001). In some ways this is similar to earlier feminist approaches to pedagogy (Gore 1992; Shewsbury 1987).

An outcome of the dominant model's focus on student learning is that it responsabilises the teacher; it is the teacher's responsibility to ensure that students learn. Teachers become personally responsible for the enterprise of ensuring the country's human capital. (McWilliam et al 1999). In a situation of increasing student numbers and declining resource this results in intensification of work load and so the desire by teachers to shift some of the work and responsibility to others such as study support teachers. Study support teachers are also likely to hold the dominant «student learning» model rather than the earlier «sorting» model although some, including the authors, would critique its lack of a social structure dimension thus leaving all responsibility with the education system (Malcolm and Zukas 2001).

#### **Structural constraints: government policy**

These pedagogic models operate within a series of

structural constraints. First there is UK government policy. This has a focus on increasing numbers in higher education, «widening participation» which means getting students into HE from backgrounds that are underrepresented (in the UK this is mainly an issue of social class). But this is combined with a belief of almost hegemonic status of keeping down public expenditure. This means that there are rapidly increasing staff-student ratios and entry into higher education of students who have had less social and educational preparation for the demands of the academy. So the need for study support as magic grows all the time. Combined with this is a strong governmental policy imperative of employability. This comes from concerns about UK performance in the global economy and the consequent policy focus on skills. The skills agenda has served to de-theorise our work. Literacy as a social practice is not the dominant model. Thus policy on literacy promotes a skills paradigm that squeezes us into a certain frame (Riddle 1997). The current UK view is that literacy at any level is a skill and that skills can be decontextualised and taught as such. Course teachers are working within this context and this reinforces the view that subject and skills are autonomous (Lillis 2000 quoted in Hinkle). In this policy climate study support becomes associated with skills rather than content or more complex writing development. We really do become about spelling.

### **Structural constraints: gender**

Another form of structural constraint explored in US literature on writing centers is gender. The role of study support as the nurturer in the hard hostile world is clearly gendered. Literature on gender in the academy indicates that women do more than their fair share of «emotional labour» (Morley 1998). In the UK, as in the US, study support tutors are mainly female. The majority of the directors are female and gender is widely recognised to be locked into narratives about professionalisation where the oldest established professions are viewed as male and the newer professions viewed as female (Acker 1994, Etzioni 1969, Morley 1998, Morley 1999). Prevailing models of writing centre pedagogy place great emphasis on support and nurture, thus the writing centres are «nurturing, helping places which provide assistance» (Harris 1981, p. 3). Grimm (1999) explains that this emphasis places the writing centre at odds with the rest of the institution which does not traditionally value these feminised gendered qualities. Although the contemporary writing centre has a mission

that seeks to support students in all disciplines at all levels, the core work continues to focus on supporting «remedial» writers. It is felt that these students need help and respite from the harshness of the university. The writing centre is «a place a nurture in contrast to the classroom as a place of torture» (Hemmeter 1990, p. 38).

US literature frequently celebrates the domestication of the writing centre. Bradley recognises this as a feature of female professionalism where women are deemed to be «bringing home into the work environment» (Bradley 1992, p. 230). Stressing that this is in contrast to a conventional classroom, Harris (1981) reminds us that there are «coffee pots and dishes of candy» because «providing nourishment is a constant activity in the writing center» (Harris 1981, p. 16). Although the movement is less developed in the UK the same approach can be seen. One of our study support teams always have fresh flowers. Bringing the home into the writing centre focuses on the domestic, as opposed to the academic, and firmly positions study support as nurture.

Another domestic analogy is how writing centre work is often viewed by course teachers as the cleaning of dirty texts (Grimm 1999 ; Harris 1981). Students are referred with texts that are so dirty (error laden) that they are beneath of dignity of a course teacher to address. Having been laundered, these texts emerge free from mistakes. This gendering militates against the moves to professionalise. The very qualities and labour that are central are qualities and labour that are antithetical to the masculinist values of the man-centered university (Rich 1979).

Equally, among study support teachers there is a discourse of democratic professionalism, noted by Sachs (2001) of school teachers' experiences in Australia, in which there is an emphasis on «collaborative, co-operative action between teachers» (Sachs 2001, p. 153). Sachs links the concept of a democratic professional discourse to an activist positioning in «democratic discourses gives rise to the development of communities of practice» (Sachs 2001, p. 158). The US writing centre community offer extensive support to help directors get their work recognised as scholarly in order to support tenure claims. The Writing Program Administrator's Association have published a paper that sets out «A framework by which writing administration can be seen as scholarly work» (Writing Program Administrators Association 1998). The promotion of scholarship and knowledge making are seen as

essential parts of the overall goal to seek tenure and promotion. Elsewhere the knowledge women produce is not validated by academia (Morley 1998, Morley 1999). As Morley (1998) argues, gender and power are meshed into the ways that knowledge is created and privileged by the academy.

### **Micropolitical responses**

However we do not hold a position of structural determinism. We regard higher education as a location for the operation of a number of types of conflict based on both macro issues of wider social division and micropolitical issues of power. These are connected in multiple and complex ways, situated according to local factors and there is space for agency operating dialectically with structural factors (Giddens 1979). The example above of support given by the writing center community to those seeking tenure illustrates how these principles can operate locally. Following Foucault (1998), we recognise that there is always space for action and resistance and use a micropolitical perspective to enhance understanding.

Micropolitics can be defined as the interplay, within an organisation, of the status and power of various groups based on their material interests and values to achieve their preferred outcomes (Ball 1991; Ball and Goodson 1985; Blase 1991; Gronn 1986; Hargreaves 1994). Morley (1999 p. 2) describes a micropolitical perspective as recognising «control and conflict as essential and contradictory bases of organizational life». Ball (1994) sees it as happening at all levels within an organisation and also at state and legislative levels. Micropolitics at institutional level may be «replaying larger scale scenario of educational politics» (p. 96) and

«teachers' careers, institutional micropolitics and state power and policies are all intertwined in a complex process of changes in patterns of control, relationships and values» (p. 64).

Hoyle (1982) argues that politics is about interests and that it is important to recognise the plurality of personal, professional and political interests operating in any organisation. Ball (1987) identifies key micropolitical concepts as including power, goal diversity, ideological disputation, conflict, interests, political activity and control. He also foregrounds the extent to which micropolitical activity is conscious or intuitive, strategic or short term, advancing group or individual interests, led by material interests or values and dependent on the particular situation. Both Ball (1987) and Blase (1991) emphasise that this meso level works in a dialectical

way with the macro level of national structural and cultural factors. This relates closely to structuration theory (Giddens 1979) which argues for a dialectical relationship between structure and agency.

Our earlier examples illustrate this tension. Teachers who hold the residual model of strong belief in propositional knowledge and a smaller elite system remember «better times» and resist change. Shifting work to others, Mrs Mop, is a form of improving one's material position. The desire for material comfort through lessening of intensification produces the need to stop recognising the needs of individual students. Material interests require survival techniques and therefore a need to believe in study support as magic.

### **Conclusion**

We have illustrated and attempted to illuminate the complex picture of how course teachers and study support teachers construct each other. In this final section we turn explicitly to how we, study support teachers, contribute to our own construction and suggest some dangers.

First, we tend to operate within a «nurturing model» although this may be from social analysis (cultural capital theory) rather than mothering instinct. Second, we try to do magic. We don't turn the student away even if their request is unreasonable – read and comment on 7000 words in 10 minutes. Third, our professionalisation project of building our reputation makes us infinitely helpful. We try to impress course teachers with our magic.

This leads us to boundary crossing. Through time pressure, we are tempted to hold the pen and work on the writing rather than the writer. We allocate students to a tutor for on-going support therefore a 1:1 relationship builds up and we take a high level of responsibility for their learning. We have this close relationship with the student as a badge of pride. No one else does this for the student. Our values and material interests show through! Yet are we in danger of constructing our own downfall. Is there a danger of developing dependency in our students (and course teachers)? No one is interested in the magician whose has lost her magic. Perhaps it is time to become border crossers (Kleinsasser et al. 1994), move from the binary of the study support teacher who cares about students and the course teacher who cares about content. Teachers need to take risks and adopt approaches that differ to those traditionally employed.

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