

## **Rewriting Research – a critical and creative approach to the transformation of experiential knowledge through enquiry and experiment**

**Interim Report**, September, 2008

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This last year has seen the further revision and integration of the research component into the writing programme for 120 first-year students on the introductory module *Skills & Strategies for English Studies* (U67012). This has been informed by consultation with Annie Skinner, research historian and author of *Cowley Road: A History* (2008) and Wendy Hill, the creative writing tutor who led the workshops that issued in *Oxford: One City, Many Voices* (2004). It has also benefited greatly from my attendance at and contribution to a day workshop on ‘Writing and Representing the City’ mounted by Oxford Brookes School of Arts & Languages last semester (June 2008), drawing on national contributors (notably from Goldsmiths College) and international contributors from Holland, Germany, France and the USA; as well as from conversations with colleagues engaged on relatable, Oxford-based projects in History of Art and Planning. The result has been a specific focus in the second stage of the research process on Cowley Road as ‘cityscape’ and a refining of the guidelines for creative re-writing at that stage. Last year’s (2007—8) students’ generated a wealth of rich and encouraging material supported by comment in the Portfolio.

This coming year’s students (2008—9), engaged in the first part of the activity as I write this, are set to carry through a further refined and re-pointed version over the next four weeks. This activity is proving to be one of the most productive and popular on an exclusively task-based course. Meanwhile, it is planned to pilot a small-scale, intranet version with around a dozen students, time-tabling permitting. (The logistic constraints of time-tabling on an already packed course have made this impracticable for the course as a whole.)

Indeed, a key lesson of the project is the tension experienced in trying to make curriculum space for a potentially time-consuming and individually meaningful yet also assessable research element in a course designed to equip a large number of students with a wide range of basic study skills. The essential thing, evidently, is to integrate research as a natural part of the analysis, reflection and extension of knowledge involved in the course as a whole – not to present it as a separate ‘research methodology’. This in turn has entailed a healthy sense of *re-search* (with the emphasis on the *re-*) as the ‘searching *again and afresh* of what was previously known differently’, rather than the narrowly empirical and severely limited sense of ‘research’ as ‘finding out *once and for all* what was never known otherwise’. The project gets students to see something once with relatively unfocused and untrained eyes and then see it again and afresh with a focused and directed gaze; once with their own untutored expectations and prejudices, then again differently in the light of fresh information and insight. This model of an ongoing and iterative process of ‘re-searching’ is arguably particularly suitable for the Arts and Humanities as well as some Social Sciences, and also conducive to the combinations of personal experience, collective experiment and scholarship that characterise the undergraduate curriculum.

In terms of assessment, an apparently workable solution seems to evaluate the outcomes cumulatively as part of a final Portfolio, not as individual items. Further experience this coming year will show whether this is indeed working. From a combination of personal reviews and course evaluations by students, the activity itself is being engaged in enthusiastically and with considerable success.

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