Helping students make the transition from A level to degree level writing: a staged action research approach

Lin S. Norton, Liverpool Hope University
Paul Keenan, St Margaret’s High School
Karen Williams, St Margaret’s High School
James Elander, University of Derby
Glynis McDonough, Liverpool Hope University


INTRODUCTION
One of the issues currently facing UK education is the difficulty students have in making the transition from writing at A level to degree level. This is much more than a simple study skills concern, involving as it does, adjustment to university, as well as challenging students’ cultural and epistemological beliefs (see for example, Jones et al, 1999; Lea & Street, 1998; Krause, 2001; Penrose, 2002; Cook & Rushton, 2009).

The University perspective
There is general agreement that post-16 education alone does not sufficiently prepare students for university study. A study by Smith (2004) showed that the majority of first year university undergraduates felt that A levels had not prepared them for university. Ballinger (2003) carried out a comparative study of teaching methods in English literature, in school and in university, and found that A level students were not expected to study autonomously and the development of critical analytic skills was mainly limited to preparation for specific exam questions, whereas HE students were expected to be more autonomous and were encouraged to develop more general analytical skills for assessment. The consequence, as opined in the press, is that many universities find themselves having to offer classes in essay writing because students are unable to write critically (Frean, Yobbo and Duncan, 2007).

Sometimes the issue is problematised as a characteristic of the students, yet research by Beaumont et al (2008) found that first year university students felt a culture shock coming from an environment where repeated drafts and highly directed feedback was the norm, to a context where little feedback is traditionally given and students were expected to be independent learners. Often the issue is seen as a widening participation agenda (see for example the HEFCE paper (2001) on strategies for supporting Widening Participation).

The school perspective
The British Government’s target of 50% of all 18 year olds being admitted to a university education has also had an impact on schools and advanced level provision as more students who may have previously entered the workforce are now much more likely to pursue A2 and subsequent degree courses. This may sometimes have the undesirable effect of some students pursuing A2 and degree level study without the necessary skills to achieve at the level to which they aspire. Often they feel that they do not receive the guidance and support that they need, which can lead quickly to them being disaffected, devoting less time to their studies and ultimately dropping out. This disaffection can be understood by looking at the students’ prior educational experience. At key stage 3 and 4 teachers have the opportunity to work closely with them using the principles of Assessment for Learning (AfL) as first promoted by Black & Wiliam (1998). Students are provided with the marking criteria before they complete assessed work and when their work is marked they are given very explicit feedback and guidance before being awarded a level of achievement. This contrasts sharply with the experience of A level assessment where students are required to research independently and then submit their work often without any drafting.

Clearly then, transition is not an issue that is just apparent between educational sectors but also within the school experience as students progress through key stages and then onto A levels. This is a similar situation at undergraduate level where transition is not only to university but through the entire course of the degree. Ganobsik- Williams (2009) makes this same point when she argues that the development of student writing should be seen as an ongoing process from Further Education and throughout the entire university degree experience with students capitalising and building on those skills they have already developed prior to university.

Bringing together teachers from the different sectors may, then, help students adapt and develop their writing in a continuous developmental process.

**The Flying Start project: Practices, Communities and Policies to Ease the Transition to University Writing and Assessment.**

The Flying Start project is a Higher Education Academy, National Teaching Fellowship funded project being conducted at Liverpool Hope University and the University of Derby, along with other partner institutions. This multi-level project focuses on easing the transition from A-level to degree level study, especially for students entering higher education from a widening participation background. In doing this, it is acknowledged that substantial work has already been done in the HE sector (see for example the work of the HEA English Subject Centre who have been particularly active. Reports include those of Bleimann & Webster (2006) who have produced a guide on ‘English at A level for university lecturers’ and Goddard & Beard (2007) who report on the transition for English language A level students who go onto study English language/linguistics at university.

More information about Flying Start is available from [www.hope.ac.uk/flyingstart](http://www.hope.ac.uk/flyingstart) but briefly it consists of three inter-related strands:
1. a *practice strand* focusing on student transition mentoring programmes, a programme of academic writing support to students in school, delivered by specially trained undergraduate student mentors;

2. a *communities strand* focusing on developing cross-sector communities of practice among tutors through a number of cross-sector action research projects, supported by roundtable events and symposia;

3. a *policy strand* to develop policy recommendations to reduce differences in learning, writing and assessment between UK educational sectors, through wide dissemination of a scoping paper to which interested parties are invited to comment and contribute.

The focus of the research study reported in this paper falls within the communities strand by taking an action research approach looking at two subjects of History and Geography at a secondary school and a university in the north west of England.

**Writing transition in History**

In the study of History, Booth (2009) talks about ‘worlds in collision’ where university teachers are uneasy about ‘the skills, knowledge and understanding that students bring to university’. He comments on annual surveys carried out in University History departments since 1994 and published in the journal *History Today* and draws together a synthesis of the main concerns:

‘*Many new undergraduate students:*

- *tend to be more confident collecting information than constructing their own arguments*
- *lack depth of reading in the subject, tending to rely on A level textbooks or teachers’ notes*
- *possess a largely superficial, if any, grasp of historiography or the reflexive sense of the discipline*
- *are not too confident in some key skills for university study such as critical reading, researching in the library and essay writing outside exams*
- *lack a firm grasp of grammar, spelling etc*
- *lack numeracy and foreign language skills*
- *display an increasingly instrumental approach to studying – a narrow focus on exams and grades*’

(Booth, 2009, emphasis added)

As mentioned above, transitions do not only affect the move from secondary to university level study, they also affect the move from AS to A2 with authors such as Ward (2006) giving advice to students on the new core skills that they will need at the A2 level in History.

**Writing transition in Geography**

In Geography, attracting sufficient numbers of students to study Geography at university is currently a major concern but related to that has been the issue about preparing students adequately for university study, which has been around for some time as...
witnessed by the groundbreaking GNU project (Geography for the New Undergraduate) in the late 1990’s (Dyas & Bradley, 1999). Maguire (2008) highlights some of the issues specifically in relation to academic writing such as the lack of scope for developing literacy skills particularly essay writing within the pre-HE curriculum, and what she terms a worrying development in the Geography A level syllabus, an issue expanded on by Pointon (2008):

‘The most significant assessment issue is the loss of coursework. Timed examinations are the only form of assessment allowed and, though there are fewer examinations, they are generally longer. Within them, essays are required, but the time allowed to write them varies from 30 to 90 minutes, depending on specification. The loss of coursework will hinder the development of many students’ independent learning skills; this will impact on research, analysis, and reporting. Many students will need to be taught how to research, write up, and reference their work as they commence HE.’

(Pointon, 2008, p.10)

In reviewing both the literature and the practitioners’ efforts, as evidenced in the work of the HEA and the subject centre networks, there appears to be relatively little about bringing together teachers in the separate sectors to work together. The purpose of the research study reported here was to use the Flying Start project as a vehicle for encouraging a pedagogical action research network where teachers and lecturers shared an action research project to form a community of practice as described by Wenger (1998). There were two major research aims supplemented with two subsidiary research questions (these latter two form the staged action approach).

**Research aims**

1. To analyse how effective a university-based workshops intervention would enhance AS/A2 students’ understanding of what academic writing is required at exam level in History and in Geography.

2. To evaluate the pedagogical action research methodology in terms of its capacity for bringing together teachers from the different sectors and establishing a community of practice.

**Subsidiary research questions**

1. Will the findings of the school-based intervention study form a suitable basis for further refinement and adaptation in seeking to improve practice?

2. Does presenting the findings from the school-based intervention study help lecturers and schoolteachers in the same subject to share understandings of each other’s context of the transitions in academic writing from pre-HE to the first year of university study?

**Research methods**
Two interventions were designed to be subject-specific based on an original workshop idea in the HEA context in which students were introduced to core assessment criteria (Elander et al., 2006; Norton et al., 2005). The design used a pre-and post workshop open ended measure involving 20 History A2 students and 5 Geography AS students and 2 Geography A2 students. This basic measure was supplemented by classroom observations, students’ class exercises and the two teacher/researchers’ reflections. Although each study is described separately, there was considerable overlap in design between the two and collaborative reflection carried out in a number of meetings with the HE contributor who helped guide the whole action research process.

**Phase one: the History intervention**

In phase one, the design of the four week intervention (an introductory workshop followed by three separate workshops each dealing with an examiner’s instruction) was arrived at following several meetings between the HE contributor and the History teacher. Its purpose was to help A2 History students prepare for their examinations, and in so doing point out to students the link between the criteria at A level and the criteria at university level writing. Baseline measures were established at the start of the intervention which consisted of asking an open-ended question to the students about what they understood to be required in exam answers. These answers were then analysed qualitatively looking for a level of awareness of writing criteria and were intended to be compared with students’ understandings at the end of the intervention, when they were asked to repeat the task.

Before the intervention, in an introductory session, the students were asked to write an answer to the question ‘What do examiners give marks for in an A2 exam?’ These transcripts were collected in and analysed using an iterative reading process and thematic analysis, following the procedure recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006). Students were asked if they would be willing for their work to be used in the research and allowed to choose their own pseudonyms. In the three workshops that followed, students were asked to concentrate on a specific examiner’s assessment criterion and write down their own observations during each workshop:

- **Workshop One**: The answer will be critical and sustained.
- **Workshop Two**: Answers will display a real conceptual grasp
- **Workshop Three**: Clear awareness of the relative importance of factors

The reasoning behind this focus was that it forced students to consider exactly what they thought was required in the examination and by articulating it in writing bring to the surface some of their possibly mistaken assumptions about what was required. The format of each workshop followed a similar pattern in that students were asked at the start of each lesson to give an explanation of what they thought a term meant; for example they were asked to record how they might demonstrate a ‘sustained and critical analysis of Bismarck’s Kulturkampf’. Each student was then given an exemplar answer and asked to discuss in groups whether the exemplar script had successfully achieved such an
analysis. This was followed by a class discussion with the History teacher. Towards the end of each workshop lesson, students were asked to write a revised definition of what they believed the term actually meant. The final task for the students was to produce a paragraph on one facet of the exam question for the following workshop. For example, they were asked to produce an answer about the motivation for Bismarck’s Kulturkampf. By asking them to do this, the teacher was ensuring that they translated their theoretical understanding of what was required into a practical piece of writing.

At the end of the intervention, students were asked to complete three tasks:

1. write a second response to the original question: ‘What do you think an examiner gives marks for?’

2. asked for their ideas on what they thought were the most important facets of the A level mark scheme;

3. given the university core assessment criteria for essays (Elander et al, 2006) to see if they could recognise any form their studies in the workshops. In this way it was hoped that this would give them a brief snapshot of the similarities but also of the differing expectations of A level and degree level writing.

Research findings
The answers to the first question, completed by all 20 students in the introductory session to the workshop series, were analysed using thematic analysis. The first point to note was that the teacher/researcher was surprised at what the students produced—far from finding it difficult to accurately identify what approach was required, as he had expected, he found that the majority of the students were able to make impressive points. On average students identified five different factors which they considered central to their success. All students referred to general knowledge of the period; whilst three quarters recognised the ability to communicate effectively as central (this includes references to spelling and punctuation). Two thirds used the term ‘analysis’ as being important. Only five of the 20 students, however, mentioned a convincing line of argument as being an important assessment criterion. For example, ‘Jeffrey Goodwin’ stated that you should ‘use evidence to back up any arguments you have made in your answer’. ‘James Saville’ made a similar point when stating that you should ‘give your own opinion based on the question backed up by facts’. Perhaps the best example was provided by ‘Billy Green’ who stated that you should be ‘making a point and sustaining the point through explanation’.

Some students recognised that argument was important but they seemed to believe that evaluation of historians’ views was as important as their own perspective. This was most eloquently expressed by ‘Bob Green’ who stated ‘understanding of different historical schools of thought i.e. structuralist/internationalist schools of thought.’ ‘Silvio Berlusconi’ wrote ‘they want you to show some exterior knowledge of the subject i.e. historians’ views’.

It would appear that the students do have an impressive grasp of examiners’ expectations but these observations disguise significant differences between those who appear to be the most able and others. For example ‘Vlad Tepes’ (students relished creating their own pseudonyms!) produced five important criteria and was able to describe exactly what s/he understood by these terms. An example is ‘Vlad’s’ explanation of what analysis is: ‘The ability to consider the reasons events happened as they did and how multiple factors contribute to historical events’. ‘Nabil el Zhar’, on the other hand, produced a bullet point list, in which the closest s/he came to a definition of analysis was ‘backing up points made’.

Overall when looking at the transcripts, the most detailed response was produced by ‘Vlad Tepes’ who wrote a side of A4, and the least detailed was produced by a student who wrote just four lines. As students completed this task, the teacher distributed an exemplar of a past examination answer and suggested that those students who were finding the task a little difficult might use the exemplar for inspiration. In the event, only one student responded to this opportunity; ‘Rosa Luxembourg’ produced an extra half page of ideas having previously struggled to produce anything of substance, so in this case at least the provision of some stimulus material had a big effect. As the study and the intervention workshops progressed, this pattern was repeated when students were given time to read past papers. One of the most striking comments came from ‘Sigismund K.von Furstenberg-Weber’ who wrote at the end of this first session; ‘I think that this explains my exam result!"

In workshop one, students were given past papers to use so they could refer to specific examples. The first phrase in the instruction on the exemplar paper was:

‘The answer will be critical and sustained. There will be a clear focus on “how far”’

At first, students struggled to respond to this. The average response was four lines long, with typical responses referring to the importance of argument in meeting this assessment criterion. ‘Bob Green’ was by far the most expressive. S/he managed to explain a total of ten points, developing may of them impressively: ‘A clear direction to the answer, covering each aspect in sufficient depth’. ‘Silvio Berlusconi’ was more typical in terms of a short but relevant response when s/he stated that ‘you need to show good critical awareness of all the points you have put forward…keeping the answer on topic’. ‘Charles Daley’ displayed the typical lack of confidence within the class when s/he wrote underneath her/his answer; ‘Not really sure what it means but the above is how I understand it’.

A similar pattern was followed in the other two workshops where the use of exemplars helped the students to discuss their understandings of what the examiners were looking for and what the instructions meant. It was hoped that the intervention as a whole would help students understand the exam assessment criteria and that this more sophisticated understanding would be demonstrated when they were asked again at the end of the four weeks ‘What do examiners give marks for in an A2 exam?’ Analysis of the final transcripts showed that this, in fact, did not happen. Most of the students produced an answer that was roughly the same length as their original one, making on average about
five relevant points. Only two students ‘Eric Arthur Blair’ and ‘Rudolf Elfburg’ produced much more substantial responses in this second attempt, both of whom seemed to enjoy repeating many of the phrases that had been focussed on in the workshops.

Conclusions
The major conclusions that the History teacher/researcher drew from this action research study was the impact that his approach had on students’ confidence in preparing for their examination. In terms of his own expectations he was surprised at the students’ level of sophistication in understanding the assessment criteria in broad terms at the start of the study, but despite this knowledge, they actually lacked confidence in their own ability to do well in the examination but this was markedly increased by the end of the intervention. The crucial point was that although the students were able to explain the meaning of the examination assessment terms at the start of the study they actually found it difficult to apply them when constructing their own essay answers. This finding goes some way to explain why in a similar workshop intervention with university students (but one which did not give students any experience in applying what they had learned to their own essays) psychology students felt the workshops helped them to know what was involved in good essay writing but were less sure that they would be able to actually produce that good writing (Harrington et al, 2006).

The intervention, in this current study with the History students avoided this earlier omission of the university intervention and gave students plenty of opportunity to discuss the application of the examination criteria in practical terms. In doing this some students quickly realised that their approach to answering the question was the absolute key to achieving success and that the structure of their essay would either facilitate or block them from matching their essays to the assessment criteria. The first week was instrumental in fostering this approach by focussing on how students could apply their understandings to the writing task. Students began to realise that their essay introduction afforded them the chance to set out a clear line of argument, and crucially, many of them began to realise that this had to be maintained in order to reach a logical conclusion.

Subsequent weeks solidified student progress from this very important starting point. Discussions began to follow a similar format; put simply it was the essay plan which was to be the foundation to allow students to reach the higher levels of assessment criteria. Familiarity and repetition allowed students to begin to feel comfortable in using the terms which, in turn, helped them to feel more confident in their ability to succeed.

Reflection (in the History teacher’s own words)
‘As a teacher with eight years experience, it is often possible to become wedded to one particular teaching approach. My involvement in this study has forced me to re-examine my own approach and assumptions about students. Many students surprised me with the high level of understanding of assessment criteria. It was the practical application of this information which many struggled to master; discussions with the students often led me to rethink many of my own ideas about teaching. The students seemed to enjoy the responsibility of being part of the

study groups and consequently thought more deeply about the issues than I had anticipated.

The conclusion I would draw from this would be one which is indeed taking hold in more progressive schools. The involvement of students in their own education can yield results; students at A level at least, relish the fact that their views are being taken seriously. Too often at this level, teachers abandon, many of the approaches which they adopt lower down the school and adopt a didactic approach. This can partly be explained by the pressures of time and the need to deliver the curriculum. However the danger of succumbing to these pressures is that students take no responsibility for their learning and consequently relay far too heavily on their tutor.'

**Phase two: the Geography intervention**

In phase two, a Geography teacher at the same school adopted the same research design but tailored to her subject discipline of Geography. In accordance with action research principles (Norton, 2009), the phase one of the action research cycle in History informed the development of her intervention. In this case, the format of an introductory session followed by workshops on individual examination criteria was followed but the workshops were expanded to four focusing on each of the elements in the examiners’ mark scheme:

1. Display an understanding of the topic;
2. Answers should be supported by appropriate exemplification;
3. Writing style should match the requirements and reflect the complexity of subject matter;
4. Demonstrate clear sense of purpose or coherence so that responses closely relate to the question using specialist vocabulary.

Five AS and two A2 Geography students took part and were invited to write under a pseudonym their answers to the question; ‘What do examiners give marks for?’ followed by the four workshops in which recorded observations were made as in the History phase. After these four sessions the students were then asked to revisit the initial question to see if their response was different; teacher observations were also recorded during the intervention. Subsequent refinements to this phase included much more direct instructions to the students who were asked to write fully (in the History study, it was left to the students how much or how little they wrote).

**Research findings**

Students’ initial responses were based upon their own opinion and written in paragraph form (all in excess of 250 words). Despite the length of the answers, there was a lack of depth in what the students wrote and they tended to give rather superficial or obvious statements. For example, student AS 1 wrote ‘If you are making an answer up and...
waffling the examiner will know and you won’t get good marks’. Students seemed to be trying to stretch what they were writing to satisfy the teacher’s instructions, for example e ‘not just write everything you know’ AS2.

Many of the students’ answers were based on common sense and were not the standard of reason or logic expected at this level, for example, ‘If you talked about a glacier but just made general comments the examiner would see that you really didn’t know what you were talking about’ AS2. Interestingly, there was very little difference between AS and A2 level explanations as seen in this example from an A2 student who might have been expected to write a more sophisticated answer at this stage: ‘an examiner will know if you make it up or if you have not learned it properly’ A2.

A thematic analysis of the seven transcripts before the intervention showed five broad themes:

1. Relevance to the question
2. Knowledge and understanding
3. Exemplification
4. Use of case studies
5. Use of terminology

These five themes were very basic, almost mundane, and reflected the simplistic nature of the responses to the initial question. When discussing ‘relevance to the question’ students made statements such as ‘if your answers are full of waffle and you have not included all of the relevant information the examiner might assume you don’t know the work’ AS1. The repetition of the word ‘waffle’ shows a lack of maturity in the writing and a dependence on common place and obvious statements and writing techniques.

‘Knowledge and understanding’ was mentioned by every student, for example. ‘An examiner would give you marks for showing good understanding of work you are doing’ AS2 or ‘examiner would give you marks for good knowledge of the topics’ A21. Here it is clear that students are aware that the examiner will be looking for this knowledge and understanding but that, at this stage, the students possess neither the ability nor the literacy to express it.

‘Use of exemplification’ was highlighted by all the students, for example, ‘use of real and valid examples’ AS4, however, no mention was made as to the type of examples that would be appropriate or to how they should support an answer.

‘Use of case studies’ and ‘use of terminology’ were the last two themes identified. These are very similar, and students again made very simple statements such as: ‘knowing case
studies will show you can do independent study’ AS3 or ‘definitions of terminology is (sic) what examiners will give top marks for’ A22.

In conclusion, analysing the students’ responses to the initial question before the intervention appeared to show that they had only a limited understanding of what was expected of them. This suggests that this might hinder their ability to be an autonomous and independent learner as many of their comments were simplistic and a little immature.

During the course of the four week intervention in which five sessions were held, the Geography students showed development of analysis and forethought and increasingly demonstrated their ability to self evaluate, for example, ‘explaining your points adequately to show that you are matching your answer with the complexity of the question. For example it would not be suitable to answer a nine mark question with one point’ AS1.

The original five rather vague themes were much more closely related to the phrases form the mark scheme, but as the examples show this was not simple parroting with what they had been presented. Students showed that they had not only read and discussed the elements of the mark scheme but that they had taken ownership of this language during the intervention and had internalised the information, therefore, in their answers they were beginning to use the accepted language in writing about the various elements in the mark scheme. For example, student AS1 wrote, after session three, that ‘A requirement of AS is to write a response using appropriate language, knowledge and understanding and that is in keeping with the question that has been asked, being concise and exemplifying one’s answer with relevant case study information’.

After the entire workshop programme intervention when asked to respond to the question again four different more complex themes were identified:

1. Displaying knowledge and understanding appropriately
2. Use of appropriate and relevant exemplification
3. Matching the content of answers to the complexity of the question
4. Concise writing adhering closely to the question without digressing

In order to display ‘knowledge and understanding appropriately’ students realised that they must address a question directly and not simply regurgitate information, for example, ‘writing an answer that was in keeping with the question that had been asked would show the examiner that you could match your knowledge to the requirements of the question instead of simply writing all that you had learned from a text book’ AS1 after session 3.

In writing about the second theme ‘use of appropriate and relevant exemplification’, students showed that they had progressed from stating that they simply needed to use examples, to demonstrating that they appreciated that examples should be relevant, up to date and suitable for the complexity of the question. ‘The examiner would want to see that my answers match the requirements of the question and is (sic) using all of the level three skills necessary and is (sic) suitably explained and exemplified’ AS 3 after session 3.

‘Matching the content of answers to the complexity of the question’ became a significant concern of the students after the intervention. Students began to appreciate the level of dedication and application necessary to fulfil requirements of the course. ‘The complexity of a particular subject should be considered in your answer as some subjects require more care and time. If you omit technical language, relevant calculations or explanations of processes and theories then you cannot achieve full marks’ A22 after session 3.

The first three of these new themes led all students to gain an appreciation of the necessity to ‘write concisely and adhere closely to the question without digressing’. This was the fourth new theme identified in the teacher/researcher’s thematic analysis. An example was shown by an AS students towards the end of the intervention: ‘You should answer the question and keep referring to the question throughout, if you simply write all that you know you may achieve less marks than if you attempt to specifically answer the question’ AS2 after session 4. Whilst relatively simplistic, this statement shows that the student has gained an appreciation of what the mark scheme is asking for. To come to the realisation that not writing everything you know is a good exam strategy is quite a sophisticated insight and one that many university students struggle with (Norton et al, 2009).

Conclusions
The main conclusions drawn by the geography teacher/researcher related to the increased understanding of the exam specification gained by her students. In terms of her own expectations, she was interested in how much students internalised the language used in the examination specification. She was also pleased to observe their ability to take ownership of it and alter their approach to answering a question in order to incorporate this new terminology.

The most stark difference before and after the intervention was in the nature of the language used and their understanding of the levelled assessment criteria. Prior to the intervention, the students’ language was simple and answers were forced or contrived reflecting the fact that students were instructed how to record them. Whereas, subsequent to the intervention students began to understand that greater success would be achieved through utilisation of the accepted Geographical language used in the examination specification to facilitate concise, relevant, well exemplified answers.
Reflection (in the geography teacher’s own words)
The positive influence that involvement in this process has had on my students both in terms of their increased understanding of the examination specification and their increased use of language pertaining to the specification has been pleasing and surprising, as it is an aspect of study which is often overlooked when one is trying to address the onerous task of delivering the entirety of the specification content within the allotted time period. Experienced teachers such as myself often find it necessary to substitute time spent personalising a student’s education and offering a wide variation in the media and styles used to deliver information for a more direct approach. Although this directive approach ensures coverage of all relevant content, it has the disadvantage of removing the students’ opportunity to take responsibility for their own education. This in turn, reduces their capacity for independent thought and learning. As it is widely acknowledged, autonomous learning yields not only enhanced academic performance results but also allows for the development of the personality and character of the individual.

Involvement in this research has led me to evaluate my own performance as a professional geography teacher and to question whether I teach students to regurgitate information, teach a syllabus or if I teach Geography? One would hope it is the latter, as it is a passion for the subject which leads us to teach and if we cannot pass on this enthusiasm, have we truly taught?

Action research as a method for bringing together the two sectors: an interim conclusion
At the outset, the research study was designed in the hopes that both teachers and university lecturers would come together to work on an aspect of student writing that would help ease the transition from school to university. In the event, this did not happen quite as intended although other positive spin offs appear to have resulted. In a general meeting called by the HE contributor, the History and Geography researcher/teachers were invited to meet with representative lecturers from History and Geography at the contributing university. Much was talked about generally about bringing the two sectors closer together to help students but relatively little focussed on the actual writing process itself. Consequently, it was decided by the HE contributor to change the research design of the ‘meta’ part of the study and carry out semi-structured interviews with the two participating teachers and with their subject counterparts in the university.

To date, interviews have been carried out with the History teacher and with one of the Geography lecturers. Questions have included asking the interviewees what they think are the real issues around students coming into Higher Education but specifically around academic writing; what each knows about the requirements for student writing in each other’s sector, and, what if anything they think might be wrong in the A level system and preparing students for making the transition form school to university.
These interview transcripts are yet to be analysed but will be reported in full in the final version of this paper.

**Action research reflections from the HE contributor’s perspective:**
In order to do this each of the characteristics of action research as described by Kember (2000) and elaborated in Norton (2009) will be used as a framework to discuss a ‘meta-view’ of this research study and to draw some interim conclusions.

1. **Action research as a social practice**
   Basically this means rejecting a positivist approach where the study is not decontextualised from its environment (the classroom and the specific situation of preparing for an A level examination), nor is the researcher (the teacher) separated from the researched (the students). The limitations of this approach mean that while there may be high validity in the research situation as can be seen in the participating teacher/researcher’s accounts of their own studies, it is difficult to ‘prove’ that their intervention workshops have had a measurable effect on their students’ examination performance. However, the benefits of seeing educational research as social involving the students as well as the teachers help students themselves to feel more responsible for their own learning, which is a key goal of university education. This was commented on by the History teacher in his reflective account (see above). Perhaps though, the greatest benefit comes from empowering professional teachers to carry out their own educational research which in turn helps them reflect on their teaching in a systematic way (Parker, 1997) and even to take control of their own continuing professional development. Hannay, Telford and Seller (2003) argue that this is because action research encourages teacher ownership of change initiatives; encourages collaboration; increases teacher willingness to invest time in addressing ‘problems’, and, gives teachers a voice.

2. **Aimed towards improvement**
   ‘This is an essential characteristic of action research and is basically what distinguishes it from other research approaches. Action research has the avowed intention of making things better than they were before’ (Norton, 2009). This means that action research is philosophically aligned to an educational context. In this research study, the aim has been to improve things for the participating students by enabling them to be better prepared for their examinations. It is interesting to note that both the teacher/researchers in this study were keen to improve their students’ chances in doing well in their A level examinations. There was also a further, less explicit and longer-term, aim of enabling their students to transfer their knowledge and understanding of essay writing criteria at A level to that of degree level requirements. Evidence of such a long-term effect is beyond the scope of this current research study but both teachers were encouraged to remind students that what they had learned in the workshops would serve them in good stead in their written assignments at university.

3. **Cyclical**
This does not necessarily mean simple cycles of reflection, acting, planning and observing as articulated by Kolb (1984) and then developed into a spiral as a model for action research by Carr and Kemmis (1986), but rather, progressive refinements which may come from unforeseen issues that arise out of the research. In this study, one of the progressive refinements was in terms of the actual design of the intervention itself, where the experience of the History teacher/researcher (phase one/ action research cycle one) in asking students to write about what they thought an A level examiner would give marks for without any precise instructions led to less writing and less detail than was expected. In the Geography intervention (phase two/ action research cycle two), the teacher/researcher built on this initial experience and refined her design to give more precise instructions in which students were asked to write as if they were addressing the examiner. Continuing meetings between both teacher/researchers and the HE contributor to discuss the research, the analysis and the implications mean that any further cycles of action research will not only have a shared research methodology, but will also have improved workshop interventions based on the experience gained in these first two phases.

4. Systematic enquiry
Critics of action research and indeed educational research (see for example Hargreaves, 1996) sometimes accuse it of being less valuable than other types of research, claiming that it lacks rigour, is often untheorised and does not result in a robust body of systematic evidence to inform educational policy and professional practice. However, such critiques privilege knowledge and experimental methods and causal explanations over knowledge which is immediate, practitioner-based and contextually centred (Seider and Lemma, 2004). In action research the aim is to implement change so experimental methods may not be appropriate as they are based on tightly controlled variables which do not readily allow a change in the research design. In this research study, a change in the design already took place from phase one to phase two when the baseline measure instructions were refined. Although it is not based on a positivist approach, this does not mean that action research is a ‘soft option’ and indeed the research should be carried out just as rigorously as the most tightly controlled laboratory experiment. In this study the transcripts were subjected to thematic analysis following a procedure recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006) using a combination of inductive and theoretical analysis. As with most qualitative research, the teacher/researchers in this study made detailed observations during the workshops and fully acknowledged their own subjective role in the analysis and interpretation of the transcripts that their students produced.

5. Reflective and participative
Reflecting on practice is part of any action research cycle. The mere fact of coming together to discuss research design, interpretation of findings and plans for further modifications encourages professional reflective practice. This is further encouraged when the research is opened up to peer scrutiny and critique through presentations, conferences and ultimately journal papers. Being participative by opening up one’s research in this way helps to guard against making mistaken assumptions about one’s own practice. In this research study, both the teacher/researchers have presented their

study to the headmaster of their school and they have presented their findings to the HE contributor in order to share together the presentation for the BERA conference and the preparation of this paper. This whole process stimulates reflection not just on the part of the teacher/researchers but also on the part of the HE contributor who has learned much during the process about the issues that face students in writing for A level examinations in History and Geography.

6. Practitioner determined
Ultimately, the key driver of action research comes from the professional practitioner’s own need to know. In this research study, the two teacher/researchers clearly saw a need to help their students prepare more effectively for the A level examination. The intervention suggested by the HE contributor, which was designed for university students then had to be adapted to suit their particular context (school level and subject-based, first in History and then in Geography). Like all attempts to improve matters, the teacher/researchers needed to know if the interventions they designed and facilitated were successful or not. Interim findings form this research suggest that there were benefits for the students, in terms of confidence and a better understanding of applying their knowledge to greater effect. To prove that any improvement in their actual A level results would however be difficult to ascribe to the interventions, as this was not a controlled experiment.

Overall conclusions
This action research study has served several valuable purposes. It has brought benefits to the students who were involved—a primary goal; it has enabled the teachers and the HE contributor to engage in participative reflection, and hopefully it has given the teacher/researchers some experience and skills in carrying out a qualitative research study. A longer term effect has been to bring closer together the two sectors which is a key aim of the Flying start project, and is one which the ongoing interview study will seek to address.

References


Booth, A (2009) Worlds in collision: university tutor and student perspectives on the transition to degree level History, Institute of Historical Research. Available at


This document was added to the Education-line collection on 14 September 2009.