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Ventriloquising the Voice: Writing in the University

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Until we are capable of serious speech again—i.e., are re-born, are men [speaking] in a waking moment, to men in their waking moment' (XVIII, 6) —our words do not carry our conviction, we cannot fully back them, because either we are careless of our convictions, or think we haven't any, or imagine they are inexpressible. They are merely unutterable (Cavell, 1981, p. 34).

STUDENT WRITING IN UNIVERSITY

In recent years there has been an increase in the number and variety of methods used by universities to support students' writing at undergraduate and at Masters' levels. This is exemplified by more formal study preparation courses at induction, study skills packs and websites, taught courses on academic writing, and the appointment of tutors whose primary role is to support students with the development of academic and study skills. One particular study skills aid has been the writing frame, now used widely to support students in the preparation of summatively assessed written work. (An example is provided in the Appendix.) The writing frame is typically designed by lecturing staff to offer very structured support for their students' writing. The frame often supplies very detailed scaffolding of a particular type of written task, not only in respect of overall structure and organisation, but also with regard to required content in general and in specific terms, and of appropriate elements of language, style and compliance with academic conventions. The increasingly widespread use of writing frames, particularly in schools, tends to be seen as a positive move to encourage reluctant or struggling writers, and the writing frame's more general appeal in the school context lies in its potential to help develop children's confidence with some of the basic aspects of genre, of structuring writing and of enhancing textual cohesion.

In the university, the writing frame appears to serve a rather different purpose from that in school contexts. Its use is ineluctably linked to formal student assessment rather than being used, as is generally the case in schools, as a developmental tool. Where students have been advised, or even required, to use the writing frame in presenting work for grading, the tutor can more easily assess the extent to which the student has complied with the requirements of the assignment. In this way, it is argued, the consistency of assessment decisions is increased, and standardisation of marking is more easily attained, especially in cases where large numbers of

assignments are being marked by different tutors.

The writing frame typically guides students' work and may merely give simple content headings as prompts. More detailed writing frames perform an additional function and determine students' sentence structure, choice of words and forms of expression through the provision of model sentences from which students make selections or into which they insert the appropriate terms. Such tools, it is often argued, help students to articulate their ideas using an appropriate register and to comply with the more general conventions of writing in academia. The practice of using writing frames has long been established in adult literacy classes to support the development of writing, but more recently has been recognised by England's National Literacy Strategy for schools as a valuable resource for supporting children's writing skills across different curriculum areas (DfEE, 2000). Indeed, inspectorate bodies and curriculum advisors from different sectors of education highlight the use of such supporting strategies and applaud the 'scaffolding' that teachers are able to offer and the differentiation in teaching and assessment that such tools afford. Such initiatives, however, are not limited to European approaches to the teaching of writing. Annemarie Jackson's work in the United States shows how writing frames can be used effectively by teachers to model and to support narrative writing as pupils work towards independent composition (Jackson, 2003).

The increasing use of the writing frame in the university might be attributed to two key factors. First, recent years have witnessed a shift, particularly in the United Kingdom, from an elite, to a mass higher education system as part of an agenda of widening participation to university education, and in addition a shift to a broader curriculum that includes vocationally oriented courses and programmes of professional training and development. The increasing number of non-traditional university entrants, from culturally, socially and linguistically diverse backgrounds may be one contributory factor in the need some universities perceive to support students in replicating the specific discourses of more traditional forms of academic writing. Some students, indeed, feel an uneasiness in relation to aspects of what is generally considered as 'academic writing'. This is not primarily the result of a lack of confidence, or even ability, with written—as opposed to oral—forms of expression as some may claim, but, as Theresa Lillis' empirical investigations appear to show, is symptomatic of some students' views that academic writing involves a conflict, even a denial of the self (Lillis, 2003). Given these not insignificant changes in the student population, and in light of the time constraints and resource pressures faced by universities, the difficult issue of supporting such student need is indeed a pressing one, and the writing frame appears to offer a desirable mechanism for supporting assessed writing.

A second, and perhaps more compelling, reason for the prevalence of writing frames within the university is the culture of performativity that pervades assessment regimes. In many institutions students' work must meet particular learning outcomes in addition to specific assessment criteria. In an education system increasingly driven by market forces, the achievement rates on courses have rarely been subject to such scrutiny, and the need to provide a competitive edge in student support has rarely been so urgent. More significantly, students paying considerable sums of money in tuition fees naturally appear keen to protect their investment and improve the likelihood of their passing assessments through the use of aids specifically designed to help with each written assignment. Writing frames are one way of

increasing the chance that students' written work is structured appropriately, contains relevant content and conforms to academic conventions, with the result that the likelihood of success, though not guaranteed, is enhanced significantly.

But little consideration seems to be given to what type of learning is engendered by the use of the writing frame in a university education. Is such learning in some way artificial, and what might constitute a more authentic academic development? In considering how students are best served in terms of their academic development, attention needs to be drawn to the distinction between the writing frame as a particular manifestation of support for student writing, and other forms of induction to, or assistance with, aspects of academic work that enable, rather than restrict, the possibilities of thought. The approaches that enable students to develop their skills of confident argument in writing, or to defend and refine their ideas in the light of criticism, might rightly be considered as supporting legitimate educational aims in the university, and moreover, what we might call a student's writing voice is developed through learning these very skills.

I argue that student writing can be affected detrimentally when it is merely constructed in response to such rigid frames. Moreover, in some cases the whole focus of the assessment appears changed. The use of the writing frame is driven and controlled by the pressures of the assessment. Writing frames seem to offer students an increased chance of success in assessment, and the university the possibility of an increase in student achievement rates. Indeed the writing frame used as a tool to serve to the needs of the assessment process reduces marking to a somewhat simplistic 'tick-box' approach, rather than the considered assessment of students' knowledge, understanding, argument or critical thinking in a discipline. Marking of students' work in these cases is merely reduced diminished to an assessment of the extent to which the student has complied with the requirements of the writing frame. In a prevailing educational culture where assessment controls teaching methods to a seemingly ever increasing extent, it is not too bold a statement to say that writing according to the requirements of a frame is seen to be what writing *is*: indeed in some institutions, it champions what academic writing means.

The unease felt by some university staff over the growth in the use of writing frames is partly one of level: what might be appropriate for introducing style and genre to school children or to adults in literacy classes is highly questionable in, for example, a Masters' level university education. To use an analogy from foreign language teaching: the use of student drills that is characteristic of many beginner classes is alien to the authentic speaking required in an advanced class. Just as the language spoken by the beginner level student who repeats the teacher's drill is far removed from what it means to speak a language, so an essay following the restrictive and prescriptive directives of the writing frame is in no way an example of what it means to write in the university. But it is not just an issue of level; the writing frame also raises a second question concerning the degree of support provided. If we imagine some kind of continuum of support for students' writing, where the valuable discussion between lecturer and student on approaching, for example, the essay, a critically reflective account or the writing up of the report, is at one end of the continuum, then the use of of a highly prescribed writing frame clearly sits towards the other end. Whilst this is suggestive of a problem merely of degree, I argue, in ways that will become apparent, that the most detailed forms of the writing frame, increasingly commonly used in the university, represent a qualitative shift of a very significant kind. This

shift can be signified by a brief consideration of issues of form and content in writing. There is an inescapable and complex intertwining of concepts in any piece of writing, and the form in which such concepts are expressed. Martha Nussbaum elucidates the writer's art as follows:

Certain thoughts and ideas, a certain sense of life, reach towards expression in writing that has a certain shape and form, that uses certain structures, certain terms. Just as the plant emerges from the seeded soil, taking its form from the combined character of seed and soil, so the novel and its terms flower from and express the conceptions of the author . . . Conception and form are bound together; finding and shaping words is a matter of finding the appropriate, and so to speak, the honorable, fit between conception and expression (Nussbaum, 1990, pp. 4-5).

Advocates of the writing frame might argue that Nussbaum's comments only serve to show the usefulness of such a tool, enabling—they might call it 'empowering'—students to write, to seamlessly unite form and content. But this would be to entirely dismiss what is at the heart of Nussbaum's discussion of the writer's art: that a writer's text is 'fully imagined' and crucially for this discussion, all that makes up a piece of writing (form and content) 'flower from and express the conceptions of the author, his or her sense of what matters' (p. 5). And here is the very root of the problem for the writing frame: that it determines the content of a student's writing, not enabling the expression of *her* sense of what is important, but another's. Consider for a moment the sonnet and the haiku, both sophisticated poetic forms, each with its own established structural form which the poet follows. But such forms are not in themselves restrictive, rather they are structures that are enabling, they release the possibility of thought. In contrast, what is most problematic about the writing frame is not particularly that it is a device for establishing *structure*, but that it is one that in determining *content*, to use Nussbaum's words, refuses the flowering of the author's expressions and of her sense of what matters; it strips the writer of her power not only as an author, but also as a thinker.

VOICE IN EDUCATION

Current educational discourses seem preoccupied with the notion of encouraging, developing and providing opportunities for the expression of student voice. As Paul Standish has pointed out, voice here is understood in a highly restricted sense (Standish 2004). The emphasis on voice is one that promotes student participation, be it in the classroom through discussion, or in students' contributions to organisational quality assurance and improvement processes through the completion of, for example, end of course questionnaires where voice is synonymous with the opinions of the customer, with gaining feedback, with individual student self-expression, and with the importance of hearing the voice of the hitherto silenced learner. This is evidenced in the proliferation of assignments that require such tasks as completing a learning biography; developing and maintaining a personal development portfolio; keeping a reflective learning diary, or of writing a critically reflective account of one's professional practice. Indeed, in education, self-expression, often termed 'reflective practice', has become something of a broadly unquestioned mantra. Such emphasis on self-expression can tend towards narcissism and a

limited view of the individual as self-contained, as in some way attained, and therefore capable of voicing self-expression in an unproblematic fashion. Voice understood merely as self-expression, celebrates the finding, recognition and acknowledgement of the self without any sense of journeying towards that self that is characteristic of Emersonian moral perfectionism, or indeed of the role of the other in the perception of the self.

Voice in education is often used with reference to the practices of writing shared by the academic community across a number of subject disciplines. Writing can be highly prescribed within many traditions, not only in a limited number where the rhetorical and linguistic structures are, arguably, most easily identified. The writing frame is prized in higher education because it is seen as a tool for the development of voice in writing. But Paul Stapleton's work (2002) highlights the problem with approaches to writing that give disproportionate emphasis to 'voice' in relation to the actual *content* of the work. And this is the intractable problem of the most detailed forms of the writing frame when used in the university. Marketed as a tool of developing a student's academic voice, it not only determines style and structure, perhaps in a way that is useful for some students, but also the content and the very thrust of the argument itself. It is prescription not only of what might be said, but also of what can and must be said. If student voice is understood as the expression of an individual's grappling with the problems in her subject and her exploration of these through her writing such that the result is, to use Nussbaum's words, the expression of the 'author's sense of what matters', then the writing frame denies the very voice that it promises. The writing frame, therefore, gives voice not to the student, but to its author's interpretation of the perceived rules of the discipline in relation to how, and what, knowledge is presented and therefore privileged. Theresa Lillis' work illustrates how students' writing seems engaged with what amounts to a mere 'reproduction of official discourses' (Lillis, 2003, p. 193). She attempts to show that these practices are found particularly in much pedagogy of academic writing, because they recognise and aim to reproduce only certain powerful discourses, whilst denying voice to others. This often unthinking conformity with epistemological and textual conventions in academic writing—a conformity that is an inherent risk of the writing frame—leads to a form of academic voicelessness. In challenging what she terms 'monologic', though Emerson might call 'conformist', practices in education, Lillis draws on Bakhtin to argue strongly for a more dialogic approach to the pedagogy of academic writing, and for the bringing together of different discourses to create hybrid texts. There is a danger here, though, that Lillis' approach, with its emphasis on discussion and negotiation of assignment content, her desire for student writing to be open to what she terms 'external interests and influences' (p. 204) leading to hybrid texts as new ways to 'construct meaning', might lead to what Standish refers to as 'a kind of tokenism of expression' (Standish, 2004, p. 104). The so-called development of student voice using tools such as a writing frame, I argue, lead to a kind of voicelessness. It is as if the means by which the voice is developed can actually reinforce a state of voicelessness. The point to be made here is that the writing frame, a tool of academic voice tuition, has the potential—especially in the university—to repress thinking and to result in a state of academic voicelessness. The very idea of a writing frame embodies not only the authorised, monologic nature of much knowledge in some academic disciplines, but also reinforces accepted ways of its expression and presentation. The performative culture in higher education that embraces the use of such aids leads to the silencing

of the student and to formulaic learning that amounts to a faking of education itself.

VOICE AND PHILOSOPHY

In exploring here a richer sense of how student voice in writing might be understood, I draw on the understandings of the term that have been pursued in Stanley Cavell's philosophical writing. Voice as textually mediated pronouncement or enactment, a form of self-expression in writing, is highlighted by Timothy Gould in his exploration of the concept in what he calls the method of Stanley Cavell's philosophy. For Gould, voice is a necessary condition of human expression (though is neglected and repressed by certain forms of philosophy): 'I learned to hear the question of the voice as epitomizing an entire region of questions about the means by which human beings express themselves and the depth of our need for such expression' (Gould, 1998, p. xv). Cavell's writing, its intricacies; its deliberate obfuscations; the breadth of its literary and film allusions; its ploys to slow the reader down; in sum, its style, *is* his philosophical project, the expression of his voice.

In what follows, I want to explore voice somewhat differently, as a notion that incorporates aspects of personal expressiveness, writing style, as authenticity, but also as a more complex term that is concerned with the person an individual is; with her having a language; the relationships she has with her community; her responsibility to her language and her society, that is, her responsibility to say what she means. It is voice understood in these terms that is at risk of being silenced in the university.

Voicelessness and Conformity

With the use of a rigid frame, writing takes on the literal meaning of composition, that is, of putting together. But the far richer sense of composition, which involves a crafting of language, is lost. Let me offer the following analogy. Suppose a cabinet maker, a master craftsman, were creating a bespoke piece of furniture, the end product would be unique, and, upon inspection, the hand tooled joints, the marks of the plane, the depth of polish, would all be evident. This would be, however, a very different piece of furniture from the shop-bought, flat packed, ready to assemble piece that contains all the necessary elements, together with clear instructions for the order of assembly. Perhaps the idea of an apprentice here would be a useful one, especially as the origin of the word lies in its meaning as 'someone learning'—*apprentis*, as distinct from 'someone being taught'. Moreover, Heidegger states that the work of the teacher is more difficult than that of the learner, because 'what teaching calls for is this: to let learn' (Heidegger, 1968, p. 15). For Heidegger, the craft of the apprentice is not learned by gathering knowledge or by repeated practice only. Stanley Cavell, in discussing Heidegger's *What is Called Thinking*, makes a similar point when he quotes from Emerson: "'Truly speaking, it is not instruction, but provocation, that I can receive from another soul.'" What translation will capture the idea of provocation here as calling forth, challenging?" (Cavell, 1990, pp. 37–38). What is more important, wherein lies true learning, is in developing a response to the different woods and to 'the shapes slumbering within them'. Surely the crafting of language is no different. This is

suggestive of the apprentice recognising the possibilities of the wood in the same way as the student releasing the possibilities of thought in her writing.

What is needed in the pedagogy of academic writing is not an approach that merely leads to unthinking observance, but the facilitation of student voice that recognises the importance of crafting, and of artistry. This is not a requirement for endless creativity; rather it is a moving away from the prevalent idea of the assignment with its rigid criteria that can be measured, to consider again the essay with its roots in *essayer*, to attempt or endeavour. Whilst the craftsman and apprentice analogy illustrates the expression of *individual* voice, Cavell is also concerned with the political, the community's voice, and he finds richer senses of this in readings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and of Henry David Thoreau. Whilst Emerson rejects conformity in favour of self-reliance, this is no mere individualism; conformity is a threat to democratic society, but self-reliant individuals benefit society, its religion, arts and culture. Non-conformity, characterised by aversive thinking, reminds us of Thoreau's description of thinking as being: 'beside ourselves in a sane sense' (Thoreau, 1854/1999, p. 123). 'Writing', Cavell claims, 'is the aversion of conformity, is a continual turning away from society, hence a continual turning toward it, as if for reference . . . One might call this process of writing deconformity' (Cavell, 1996, p. 66).

Recovery of Voice

If a student's voice has been repressed by the educational practices of academic writing to which she is subject, how might the recovery of voice be characterised? First, what is required is an initiation into language as it were, that previously has been blocked or frustrated for the student by particular educational practices. This is not an easy, once for all event, but rather part of an ongoing relationship with words that Thoreau describes as being our father tongue. Acquiring the father tongue is characterised by a finding of one's own way rather than by an unthinking reliance on the monologues imposed by others. Finding one's own voice, indeed one's own way, is part of the teaching of Thoreau's *Walden*: 'I desire that there be as many different persons in the world as possible; but I would have each one be careful to find out and pursue *his own way*, and not his father's or his mother's or his neighbor's instead' (Thoreau, 1854/1999, p. 65). Second, as Cavell highlights from his readings of a genre of 1940s Hollywood film that he terms the 'Melodramas of the Unknown Woman'¹ the recovery of (a woman's) voice from the monologues of a man, is through a form of *conversation* with another, a turning away from one form of language to embrace another. In the films, Cavell highlights the role of the other involved in this conversation as crucial for the recovery of voice (Cavell, 1996, 2004). I want to argue that in the university, the tutor is the 'other' who initiates the conversation that develops the student's voice in her writing.

LESSONS FOR THE PEDAGOGY OF ACADEMIC WRITING

What, then, does all this imply for the pedagogy of academic writing and for what it is to write in the university? One significant point is that writing frames, particularly in their most detailed forms, may well deny the student voice that they aim to facilitate because they stifle the release

of the possibilities of thought in writing through their prescription of content as well as structure. A further point is that student voice in academic writing cannot be forced through a tool such as a writing frame, for to do this is to subject students to a form of ventriloquism. Writing frames facilitate an easy and unquestioning reliance on established traditional forms, that can be a path to mere conformity. The development of voice for the student is through a process of initiation into the father tongue, into a form of language that may have been dormant and suppressed by academic practices such as the writing frame. But just as Thoreau's father tongue is an ongoing process, one of growth, of daily observance, so is the development of student voice.

The discussions in this paper have implications for both the student and the academic writing tutor. If the student is truly to find voice, in whatever discipline she studies, then she must see this not as something merely 'acquired' through the mastery of technical skills. Just as the apprentice to the master craftsman watches and is aware of all the skill and artistry that comprise a unique piece of furniture, and as Thoreau's reader develops an understanding that she must find her own way of accounting for her life and language, so the student, embarking on academic writing should avoid thinking that the acquisition and demonstration of a limited number of techniques is the end of a journey. A student needs to recognise not only the denial of her voice and the denial of herself, but also the enormity of what the journey to recovery of her voice will entail. Curricula for academic writing must surely deal seriously with what Cavell terms the 'grown-up social state of deafness to one's voices' (Cavell, 1994, p. 35). Recognition of, to use Emerson's term, the 'unattained self', is indeed 'a step in attaining it' (Cavell, 1990, p.12), and the process of its attainment, 'something we repetitively never arrive at, but rather, . . . a process of moving to, and from, nexts' (ibid.). Lillis calls for a re-examination of what knowledge is privileged in academia, and for the inclusion in student writing of different discourses to foreground the students' own experiences of the world. Whilst this might succeed in altering the tenor of students' academic writing in a limited fashion, what Cavell draws attention to in his discussion of writing philosophy, is to its nature as 'autobiographizing, deriving words from yourself' (Cavell, 1994, p. 41). Should this not also be a characteristic of academic writing, the kind that promotes students' self reliance, develops their autonomy as writers and which recognises their ongoing acquisition of the father tongue?

The recovery of voice involves a readiness to be receptive to the new, to depart from settled ways of thinking or writing, to use Thoreau's celebrated pun, to embrace both 'mourning' and 'morning'. Such a mourning, a leaving of some words behind, is necessary in order to aspire to others and be found by others. This aspect of the recovery and development of voice is notably absent from Lillis' discussions. Whilst she demonstrates successfully that students feel voiceless in the face of the academic writing practices and assessment requirements of many universities, her proposed solutions at best offer only a temporary outlet for self-expression at a given moment in time, and risk the very prescription and performativity of certain forms of academic writing which her design approach was intended to overcome. If the denial of voice is a denial of the self, then the recovery of voice is a finding of the self and the expression of voice a *continual* process of re-finding one's self. Any curriculum for academic writing should recognise the denial of the self that mere mastery learning suggests, and the ongoing possibilities for the creation of the self that voice coaching affords. The continual creation of the self, through the development of voice, is, for Cavell, akin to a re-birth; not a physical experience, but a re-birth

into language, into ‘serious speech’, that is, into the father tongue. This is suggestive of a different and compelling notion of voice, one that speaks loudly to the academic community: voice is not something that can, or should, be taught and learned through an aid such as a writing frame, but rather developed as an expression of the worded nature of our individual and political lives.

NOTE

1. Cavell (1996, p. 3) identifies the following films as representative of the genre: *Stella Dallas* (1937) *Now Voyager* (1942) and *Gaslight* (1944).

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Appendix

Writing Frame for Final Assessment of BA in Education: Introduction to Research—year 1 Core Module

This frame provides a structure for your consideration of the issues raised by planning to undertake a piece of small scale empirical research. Following the guidelines below will enable you to meet the module learning outcomes. You should note the headings and detail required against which you will be assessed:

1. Introduction (200 words)

Identification of research question or hypothesis

- 1.1 Introduce your questions. E.g. *'This small scale study proposes to answer the following question(s): ...'*
- 1.2 *Description of context for the research (national or regional policy/organisational) E.g. 'This research is of current importance in the field of ... because of ...'*

2. Justification of approach to the research (400 words)

- 2.1 State your broad approach to the study: is it interpretive or positivist?
- 2.2 Situate your research within the field. Answer the following questions: (i) Is this an entirely new field of research? If not, what distinctive approach are you taking (methodologically; with your sample; with data analysis?); (ii) What existing research is there in your field—historical and current? E.g. *'Although research has been carried out in this area over the last ... years (give citations), the most current work is being undertaken by ... (give citations).'*
- 2.3 Justification of why the research fits into one of the categories—or how it crosses the boundaries E.g. *'Although this research will be of a broadly qualitative nature as it will use ... as its main data collection method, the use of ... demonstrates that quantitative data will also be considered because ...'*

3. Description of and justification for proposed research method(s) (1000 words)

- 3.1 Justification for the choice of research method or methods
- 3.2 Describe each method in turn. Answer the following questions (i) What does the literature say are the advantages of your method(s) for the kind of question(s) you are posing? Give citations to texts from the indicative reading list; (ii) What other methods might you have chosen, and why did you reject them?
- 3.3 Analysis of any issues of triangulation. What kind of triangulation will you use (methodological triangulation? participant triangulation? triangulation in analysis?) Why?
- 3.4 In this section you should also cover:

- internal validity of the method(s); reliability of the method(s)
- a discussion of population and justification for the size of the sample
- method (s) of sampling (random, purposive, stratified?) Discuss the effect of the sample and sampling method on the data

4. Ethical issues (300 words)

- 4.1 To introduce this section, define ethics within the research process. (use citations and/or quotes from the module notes). Show knowledge of the various guidelines affecting educational research—e.g. BERA guidelines.
- 4.2 Show how you would approach ethical issues in your research. Answer the following questions: (i) How would you gain institutional ethical clearance? (ii) how would you gain informed consent? (iii) What measures would you put in place to ensure participant confidentiality? Ensure that you append copies of your documentation as appendices to your work.
- 4.3 In this section you should also cover:
- Ethical issues in the collection of data (you should take a position on taping and video taping participants; what are the advantages/disadvantages of taping and transcribing over taking notes?)
 - Ethical issues in the writing up of data (for example, participant editing)
 - Storage of data, access to and destruction of data
 - Power relationships in the research process

5. Data analysis (400 words)

- 5.1 For each type of data you collect, include a section on how you will analyse it. Specify the process of data analysis (make reference the relevant literature covered in the module). In particular, cover the following areas:
- Consideration of ICT versus manual methods
 - How you will deal with anomalies in your data
 - Critical discussion of your own positionality and its effects on the data analysis process
 - Generalisability (external validity) of the data and issues of demographics
- 5.2 Remember to relate this section to work that has already been done in your field. *E.g. 'Whilst the studies undertaken by ... and ... (citations) focussed on ... in the data analysis process, my plan is to ... because ...'.*

6. Conclusion (200 words)

- 6.1 You must show awareness of the difficulties that can arise in the research process and of the cyclical, rather than linear, nature of much educational research. Answer the following questions: (i) How might you need to adapt your research plans? (ii) How might funding of your research or institutional commissioning affect your plans? How might timescales affect your plans? How might the research be developed given additional resources?