STUDENTS’ EXPERIENCES

OF THE FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT OF ESSAYS

IN HISTORY AND ARCHAEOLOGY AT OXFORD

A research and development project funded by the Subject Centre for History, Classics and Archaeology
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INTRODUCTION TO THE PROJECT

The centrality of formative assessment as the engine of improvement in student learning is well-established in a seminal review of formative assessment research (Black and Wiliam, 1998): 'gains in achievement [as a result of enhancement of formative assessment practice are] amongst the largest ever reported in educational interventions'. There is much scope for enhancing student learning by honing our understanding of students’ formative assessment needs according to their disciplinary contexts and intellectual maturity.

The starting point for this research is the framework offered by academic literacies literature (see for example Lee and Steirer, 2000) which focuses on the ways in which students learn to write in academic contexts. Their framework encompasses the ‘study skills’ idea that students need to acquire certain ‘techniques’, and the notion of ‘socialisation’ into particular conventions in academic discourse but, importantly, extends these ideas by suggesting that students also actively construct habits of learning and writing and often negotiate conflicting discourses. Furthermore, in their writing students are expressing particular ways of constructing the world rather than simply demonstrating their mastery of essay technique. This perspective is the starting point for the project in that it focuses on students’ developing interpretations of what is involved in essay-writing. The processes of formative assessment are thus situated within developments over time and within dynamic relationships between students, as temporary participants in a discipline, and their tutors, its permanent residents in that community of practice. Their tutors have crucial roles in developing students’ capacity to engage in the academic discourse that prevails within their discipline (Northedge, 2003).

Sadler (1989) offers us a complementary framework within which to explore the ways in which students make use of formative assessment as they acquire academic literacy. In particular, he draws attention to the complexity of qualitative assessment criteria, their contestability, and the gradual processes by which students become connoisseurs of the discipline in which they are engaged. Importantly Sadler recognises that assessment criteria cannot always be made explicit, and authentic understanding of, for example, what it means to think critically, occurs when a student becomes a critical thinker. Finally, it is worth noting that Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006), in their distillation of a broad range of research literature on formative assessment, draw particular attention to the centrality of the students’ own role in making formative assessment effective. Tutor feedback, no matter how well-crafted, timely or extensive, is only effective if it has entered into the student’s own assessment of her work.

This project investigated formative assessment processes in learning and teaching within History and Archaeology at Oxford during 2002-3. Our approach was underpinned both by the relevant educational research literature and by the professional knowledge of university teachers that resides at discipline-specific level and is shaped by institutional and departmental culture. Our aims were:

1. to deepen our understanding of formative assessment practices, and in particular, of the developing and variable functions of assessment criteria in the experience of undergraduate students;

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1 Formative assessment is defined here as ‘[A]ll those activities undertaken by teachers, and/or by their students, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged’ (Black and Wiliam, 1998)
2. to explore the utility and implications of literature on formative assessment for the teaching practice and contexts of archaeologists and historians at Oxford;
3. to formulate understandings which will inform decision-making relating to formative assessment at individual tutor level and at faculty- or school-level;
4. to inform learning and teaching development initiatives with discipline-specific examples of the formative assessment experiences of Archaeology and History students.

These aims were pursued through a small exploratory study of formative assessment in relation to essays.  

The project team

The project, which took place during 2003-3 was led by Dr Ian Archer at the History Faculty and Dr John Bennet then at the School of Archaeology, Oxford. The researchers were Dr Joanne Bailey (History) and Dr Helen Gittos (Archaeology). Joanne and Helen had just completed their doctorates and had been tutoring students at Oxford. The project’s educational adviser and co-ordinator was Ms Duna Sabri then at the Oxford Learning Institute and Ms Hannah Boschen (also at OLI) provided administrative support.

At the time of completion of this report in 2006 several of the project team members have moved on. Ian Archer continues to be Tutor in History and Fellow of Keble College, Oxford. He is now also an Academic Adviser to the Humanities Division at Oxford working with the Oxford Learning Institute. Joanne Bailey is now Senior Lecturer in Early Modern History, Oxford Brookes University. Hannah Boschen is now a Learning Co-ordinator at the Oxford Learning Institute. John Bennet is Professor of Aegean Archaeology, University of Sheffield. Helen Gittos is Lecturer in Medieval History, University of Leeds. Duna Sabri is completing her DPhil thesis, and continues to be Fellow of Harris Manchester College, Oxford.

Acknowledgements

The project team would like to thank the 36 students who participated in the research and the 12 tutors who allowed us access to their students and shared their own insights about their practice. We are also grateful to the staff of the Learning and Teaching Subject Centre for History and Archaeology for funding the project, and encouraging its completion.

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1 Undergraduate students’ term time essays in these disciplines at the University of Oxford are assessed for formative purposes only.
**METHODOLOGY**

Primarily this research is an exploration of students’ experience of formative assessment – in particular of the interpretation of assessment criteria and experience of formative assessment opportunities. Students’ experiences were explored in two interviews and analysis of their written work. A total of 36 students were involved, 18 from each discipline and 6 from each year within each discipline. Each student was interviewed twice: once in the Autumn term and once in the Summer term. The purpose of the interviews was to ascertain the students’ understanding of what they are aiming for and the ways in which the sample essay meets the assessment criteria, as they understand them. The two interviews were intended to track students’ developing understandings to the limited extent that this is possible in a yearlong project. In the second of the two interviews the researchers reminded the students of their responses to the first interview and asked for their comments on those earlier responses. Essays were used as the basis of the interviews in order to enable researchers to discuss with students real examples of their work and, in doing so, connect abstract generalisations to students’ thinking in relation to actual practice.

At the start of the interviews researchers assured students of confidentiality and, in particular, that what they said in interviews would not be shared with their tutors in a way that identified them individually. The interview was not designed to be an assessment but an open conversation about the process of preparing for essays, the purpose of essays, feedback on essays and the students’ own assessment of their work. There were also opportunities for the students to ask any questions about the interviews and to withdraw from participation in the research at any point. In practice, none withdrew. The second student interviews were designed to elicit students’ reflections on their progress since the first interview and also to take a second ‘snapshot’ of their perceptions and experiences.

The interview questions (see appendix 1) were based on a model of formative assessment that derives from Sadler’s (1989) work and that has since been elaborated by Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006). Essentially, the model begins with acknowledging that one of the primary challenges for students is to acquire an understanding of what high quality work is (Sadler 1989). They also make decisions about what strategies to adopt in order to produce what they understand to be required of them. When an artefact of some kind has been produced – essay, problem answer, etc – an assessment is generated of its quality. This assessment is informed by the students’ own views and feeling about it and the students’ interpretation of comments made by others including tutors. The functions of this assessment are important. In particular it challenges the student’s beliefs about what high quality work is, as well as suggesting ways of evaluating and modifying her work to attain higher standards.

Our study also included consideration of the context within which students are operating. This was based on exploratory discussions with tutors to determine their perceptions of the assessment criteria and their understanding of how the criteria are communicated to students. The questions for tutors were based on the Sadler/ Nicol model which was adapted to foreground conceptions of formative assessment, strategies for formative assessment, and changes in conceptions and strategies.

The analysis of the interview data was undertaken in stages. At each of the three interview phases – the first student interviews, the tutor interviews and the second student interviews – the researchers listened to the tapes after each interview, drawing out the key issues and themes, and, in looking across their set of interviews, highlighting commonalities and
differences. Preliminary drafts were circulated amongst the full project team so that all members could engage in the collective process of analysis. Rigour was enhanced by a selection of tapes also being listened to by the Educational Development Advisor in order to provide the basis for detailed discussions of interpretation of students’ accounts of their experiences. The full team met after each interview phase to consider the provisional findings and, in the light of these discussions, researchers returned to the data to produce a more developed report on each interview set. The final stage in the data analysis process involved examining all six reports and sets of interviews in order to distil these into the findings presented in the next section of this report.

Throughout the findings direct and indirect quotations from students and tutors are used. Gender is assigned randomly as part of our efforts to ensure anonymity for research participants. The discipline of the research participant is indicated by the letters H and A. The letter T indicates a quote from a tutor. The year of the students is indicated by 1, 2 or 3 – all students were full-time and none were pursuing 4-year courses.

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION ABOUT THE LEARNING CONTEXT IN OXFORD**

The study should be understood in the context of the particular characteristics of the student learning experience in Oxford.

Oxford degree courses are non-modular. Archaeology and Anthropology and History are both three-year courses. Although there is considerable choice as to options, they are drawn from within a very discipline specific syllabus. The bulk of assessment takes place by synoptic examinations at the end of the course. Although assessment is being diversified, so that some course work is examined, this is assessed alongside written examination papers. There is no provision for the accumulation and transfer of credits.

While lectures and seminars are provided by the Faculty and School, tutorial teaching is organised through the colleges. College tutors, sometimes operating with the title of Director of Studies, are responsible for co-ordinating students’ programmes of study and arranging tutorials, sometimes within College, where the appropriate expertise is available, but often with appropriate academics from other Colleges. Archaeology students are more likely to spend more time in tutorials outside their colleges and there is a slightly stronger departmental ethos (reinforced by the smaller number of students), but the contrast should not be pushed too far as undergraduate historians are likely to be taught out of College in the second and third years, and especially for their Special Subjects. One of the consequences of the College basis of teaching organisation is that the fit between tutorials and lectures is not always perfect.

Tutorials take a variety of forms. Very occasionally students are taught in singletons; pairs are much more common, and threesomes and foursomes are also found. Students usually pursue a course of tutorials on a given option over the course of an eight-week term; sometimes options are taught fortnightly across two terms. Students in both Archaeology and History might be studying more than one option at a time, but it would be highly unusual to be studying more than two. Typically historians would study one option weekly in parallel with another taught fortnightly.
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Students are usually expected to produce a piece of written work (typically an essay), based on bibliographic guidance provided by the tutor for each tutorial. These essays do not count towards examination marks. Constant formative assessment is therefore central to the Oxford system.

Another species of formative assessment is available in so-called College collections, essentially internal examinations conducted in Colleges usually at the beginning of the term after the completion of the option and the opportunity for review of the material in the intervening vacation. Again the marks awarded in collections do not count towards the degree result.

All those involved in the giving tutorials are required to produce a report on the student’s performance on a termly basis. These reports go to the Senior Tutor (the College officer with overall responsibility for academic affairs) of the student’s college. Sometimes (though not always) the reports are copied to the students; sometimes they form the basis for discussions between Directors of Studies and individual students; they would also be drawn upon in formal meetings (also confusingly called collections) between individual students, their tutors, and the head of house, usually an annual occasion.

Oxford operates a very clear demarcation between teaching and examining. The tutors involved in teaching a particular option would not necessarily be involved in setting and marking the examination papers, although setters are expected to follow the norms established by the course descriptions, bibliographies, and the conventions of past practice.

In both Archaeology and History University examinations are taken at the end of the first year and at the end of the third year. There are no second year examinations. Students have to pass the first public examination to proceed to the final honour school but performance in the first year examinations does not count towards the final degree classification.
Findings

Introduction to the findings

The findings are organised into five sections. We begin with the abstract understandings of what essays are for, how they fit into the tutorials and assessment processes (section 1). There then follows a more focused examination of the criteria that tutors and students perceive themselves to use when they consider what makes a good essay (section 2). We then move into the complex world of communication - through language and practice – about what makes a good essay and how feedback is constructed, interpreted and used (section 3). We then look at the developmental process of learning to write and coming to understand, in relation to one's own work, what it means to write an essay as a historian or an archaeologist. Within this developmental process we consider the turning points, pitfalls and milestones that students tend to go through as they learn to assess for themselves (section 4). Finally, we consider the role of peers and the extent to which students learn from each other (section 5).

There is much in these findings that was found to be common between the historians and the archaeologists. The findings are therefore presented in a single report. Where there were discipline-specific variations, these are explored in the relevant sections. Most notably, there are differences in the criteria used for the assessment of essays, and even when criteria are common at an abstract level, there are often variations in their meanings in practice. Discipline-specific variation also arose from the different contexts within which history and archaeology were being studied: history was (for the most part) studied as a single-honours course whilst archaeology was a joint-honours course typically studied alongside anthropology.

The purposes of essays

This section outlines how tutors and students perceive the role of essays in relation to other key elements of the curriculum. It considers first the intrinsic benefits of producing essays before going on to relate these to the purpose of tutorials, the main forum for the discussion of essays. Finally, it considers different conceptions of the relationship between essays produced for tutorials and essays produced in exams.

What are the essays for?

There were commonalities and some differences in emphasis between tutors and students on the question of the purpose of essays: they were almost universally seen as a means for students to ‘organise themselves intellectually’ to learn how to construct arguments supported by evidence, to identify the most significant aspects of a topic, to be critical about what they read, and to develop their written communication skills. For some tutors there was also an element of initiation into the world of their discipline. They were a means of encouraging students to see themselves as historians or archaeologists and to gradually develop their own voice within the conventions of the discipline.

In contrast, most students focused on comprehension of specific topics as the purpose of essay-writing though the further advanced the students the more likely they were to see the purpose of essays as integrated within their own construction of new material. The task was also one that shaped the week’s work as a whole: *it orders what you read [A2], forces you*
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to work out what you think [A3] and also makes it easier to remember[A1]. Among finalists, in particular, the emphasis is also on preparation for exams.

For one third year archaeologist, essays would help in the choice of a future postgraduate subject area. Third years tended also to set the purpose of essays in the context of preparation for exams and future careers:

\[a \text{large part of why you write the essay is that you’re well equipped for finals, so you get a degree…..Oxford teaches you to make use of not a lot’ [so that Oxford graduates] get the best jobs. [H3]}\]

Whilst such generic or ‘transferable’ skills as clarity of expression and conciseness were also at the forefront of many tutors’ responses to this question, there was some ambivalence about the extent to which these fulfilled tutors’ aspirations for their students:

\[they have a facile skill that is quite impressive and convincing, but is sometimes deceptive in terms of the actual subject matter. They’re not necessarily gaining the sophisticated understanding that you might expect from the formal sophistication of the way they write their essays. [HT}\]

Students’ understandings of the task of writing essays were clearly situated within other priorities. Problems with managing competing pressures on time were often mentioned. First years were optimistic that this could be resolved with practice. Second years who had the same types of problems seemed resigned to established patterns of work. One second year described her method of essay preparation and writing as lazy by which she meant:

\[my \text{work is always my least priority, there are always about 500 other things I want to do. [H2]}\]

A third year said that he had come to realise that the reason for Oxford tutorials was not:

\[so that you can read everything on the reading list … it’s so that you can produce something having read like … five books and …. having played rugby three times a week and rowed and whatever and then still be able to come to the tutorial and do something, because … that’s obviously the challenge of Oxford. [H3]\]

**Essays as part of the tutorial process**

All students saw the essay as the starting point for the tutorial - the backbone of the tutorial or a sort of magnet for the discussion. For some students there was a sense that their preparatory work would never live up to the standards of an ideal tutorial: for instance a third year historian was of the opinion that \(you’re \text{kind of going a bit above yourself if you expect every tutorial to be some kind of like great intellectual discussion, because she felt that as a student she did not have the intellectual capacity, or could not read sufficiently, to be able to contribute to the discussion as an intellectual equal.}\)

Indeed the role of the tutor was constructed as supervisor. Most students saw the essay as a monitoring tool for tutors to ensure during tutorials that some work has been done, and the essay was a means of demonstrating that they have done some thinking in advance of the tutorial discussion where their ideas would be tested:

\[\text{[the essay is] not, like, the answer, but a way of preparing yourself so you’ve thought about it and are able to talk about it [A2].}\]

\[you \text{know obviously you’re not actually looking to get to the truth of the matter … it’s more about, kind of like, an exercise in argument isn’t it? [H2]}\]
What these two quotations also demonstrate is a conception held by some students of the essay an artefact of one stage of their developing understanding of a given topic: essays were not a definitive product but working documents.

Most students identified a good tutorial as one that touches on wider issues that go beyond the essay. This was understood to be a way to clarify areas of misunderstanding and to distinguish between alternative schools of thought, and prepare for the exam. As one second year historian commented,

*I write my essay, which is ... just a streamlining of my ideas really, all my reading I should say. And then the tutorial is more of the opposite. That's when you're kind of allowed to spread out and go down blind alleys and see what happens and leap across periods and time and space [H2].*

**The relationship between the tutorial essay and preparation for exams**

What students said about the relationship between their tutorial essays and the essays they would be expected to write for exams was extremely illuminating. It was often particular conceptions of this relationship that lay behind long descriptive survey style essays. Anxieties about having enough material to revise from were common among students who saw the relationship between tutorial essays and exam essays in terms of content: all material must be 'covered' in a tutorial essay.

*we almost don't really answer the question [so that in exam conditions] you can use the same information and actually write a good exam essay even if the tutorial was really bad [A2].*

The alternative conception of the relationship, held by many tutors and some students across all year groups, is an analytic one where tutorial essays are practice for students not in rehearsing material but in analysis, ‘unpacking’ the question, formulating an argument and marshalling evidence to support it. For students who were producing analytic, highly focused essays, the ‘survey’ function was fulfilled in the production of notes. One first historian year said:

*I'd consider the note writing to be more important than the essay writing. That’s certainly the impression I’ve been given by my history tutor. Purely for the basis that your notes are what your courses are about and for your exams, whereas your essays are for consolidating what you’ve read [H1].*

This relationship did not seem to have been discussed explicitly in many instances before the interview took place. Students more typically reported that their tutors told them simply not to revise from their essays. They did not seem to understand, or possibly did not share, their tutors’ rationale for this advice. In general, tutors did not express this so unequivocally in the interviews and several saw essays, in combination with notes taken in tutorials, acting as ‘revision documents’ that could help students develop their own perspectives.

For many students, the essay acts as their primary starting point for revision because it represents their personal understanding of a given topic. An unqualified injunction not to use essays for revision is therefore often ignored. How students come to see the relationship between tutorial essays and exam essays is significant because it seems to determine their capacity to make the most of the learning opportunities presented by tutorial work. Opportunities for challenging students’ conception of the relationship may lie in explicit discussion of the issue with students. It may be possible, too, to integrate such a discussion within more general advice about answering exam questions.
There were certain ways in which tutorial essays were perceived to be poor preparation for exams. A common experience was a lack of practice in handwriting. The students identified typing and cutting and pasting as having become intrinsic to their tutorial essay writing and saw it as detrimental to their capacity to organise thoughts and to write enough under exam conditions. On the other hand, putting the mechanistic aspects of handwriting practice aside, some students talked about using tutorial essays to experiment with their writing and to test out ideas in order to gain confidence to use them in an exam situation. Tutorial essays were characterised as open and debating, whereas the resulting exam essay needs to be resoundingly conclusive [H3].

Assessment of essays
This section focuses on the assessment criteria that were mentioned by tutors and students. It also introduces some observations about the ways in which these criteria were seen as problematic. These observations are elaborated in the following section on the language and practice of assessment. This section ends with a summary of the sources that students believed influenced their understanding of essay-writing.

What makes a good essay?
Tutors' initial responses to the question about criteria for what makes a good essay often included the qualification that they do not seek a ‘correct’ answer. Primarily they are looking for an argument that consistently addresses the question. They define good essays in generic ways as incisive, precise, concise, critically evaluating arguments, containing personal interpretation and demonstrating independence of mind.

There were also some discipline-specific criteria in use as well: the construction of an argument needed to conform to craft or guild expectations and answer historians’ concerns about proof and use evidence effectively [HT]. The archaeologists expressed equivalent criteria in different terms: to see the wood for the trees, to apply principles learnt to different types of material, to evaluate theories by assessing the evidence [AT]. In addition, they mentioned the need for archaeology students to relate their knowledge of archaeology to anthropology [AT].

The most frequently mentioned criterion among both history and archaeology students was good essay structure. Other commonly mentioned criteria included the need to answer the question and support with evidence. An inclusion of one’s own ideas was mentioned across all three years but only among finalists was this placed alongside the need to criticise previous work and to say something new. Finalists were often conscious of needing to produce a strong argument. Discipline-specific criteria were mentioned by students as well. The archaeologists identified the need to integrate the use of theory and case studies. The historians focused on the use of historiography as an important element of a good essay. For some historians this should be dealt with in the introduction whilst for others a good essay demonstrates where it sits in the existing historiography throughout the essay.

On the whole, the more advanced the students, the more they were able to elaborate each criterion. For example, structure for some finalists was characterised by simplicity and clarity. More generally students defined structure as entailing a logical progression of ideas, and arguing both sides of a debate.
For some students the criteria for good essays were embedded in their subjective experience of writing it. A good essay should be enjoyable to write and result in a personal satisfaction with the writer’s achievement:

...a good essay from my point of view is to think, when I’ve written it, yes, I’ve really understood that; yes, I’ve really done something well. [H2]

it’s if the essay flowed well when you’re writing it, or if you really struggled. But then sometimes even if you really struggle, when you’ve finished reading it you think actually, and it’s clicked and made sense by then, so you’re quite happy’. [A3]

Most commonly among first years, what the tutor wants or would be impressed by constituted a criterion for a good essay. This was evident on the way in which they talked about particular criteria:

Just following what [the tutor] says, I guess [A1]

like, in the introduction apparently we’re supposed to say ... [A1]

...because my tutor said we ought to. [H1]

Third years were more likely to use phrases such as I like it when, I think you should. They tended to know why they had left something out, or didn’t fulfil a criterion, why criteria are important, why alternative suggestions offered by tutors are preferable and are more likely to point to places in their essays where they had achieved their objectives.

There was variation in students’ ability to relate abstract criteria (particularly of what made an essay good) to specific examples in their own essays: third years seemed better able to relate abstract criteria to their own work.

There is evidence that first years, in particular, often have an understanding of assessment criteria that they are not yet able to apply:

I would like my essays to be a very well-balanced over-view of the title ... but I just haven't had time to do that ... I've spent hours and hours, put so much effort in but it's always mediocre.[A1]

Such frustration was evident among a few students in later years who also seemed least comfortable with the ‘meta’ discussion of the process of essay-writing in the interview. The ways in which many students assess their own work seems intuitive and not necessarily informed by the assessment criteria they articulate. For some it depends on how they feel about their work when they are writing. Explicit articulation is certainly less common in the earlier stages of students’ experience of essay-writing but is by no means universal in the later stages..

Sources of guidance about assessment criteria

Preparation at ‘A’ level was an enduring reference point for many students’ developing understanding of essay-writing at Oxford. The classic ‘A’ level approach was defined as a balanced argument which considered both sides followed by a conclusion weighing them up. ‘A’ level style was often recognised as inadequate at University and there was a desire to move beyond it. Some felt that while ‘A’ level preparation was simplistic, it provided a useful framework for assembling thoughts, which could then be adapted.
Tutors’ guidance was a source for understanding what makes a good essay in particular for third years and less so for first years. A few students did not see tutors as a source of explicit information about what is expected of them in an essay. One second year felt he had not received any guidance at all except for one comment at the beginning of the first year – ‘your sentences are too long and confused’ and I thought right, well, I’d better shorten them [A2].

Journal articles were very important to many students as a model for a good essay. Their relative brevity and narrow focus meant that they represented, for some students, an example of an easily identifiable argument and a concise treatment of a complex issue.

Handbooks were almost never a source of information for what makes a good essay; they were either not read or dismissed by both historians and archaeologists. *we were given a book; it was called “Guide to Good Practice” and that told us what sort of books we should be looking at and it gave a vague idea of length, I think, although I didn’t look at it for very long.* [A2]

In contrast students from one college commented favourably on a discipline-specific college study-skills survival pack that included guidance on essay-writing. Several archaeologists said that other students had influenced their views of what makes good essays.

**The construction and interpretation of assessment**

This section begins with an overview of how tutors perceived, and questioned, ‘assessment’ as a component of their interaction with students. We then explore students’ perceptions of their experience of assessment before going on to consider one of the most complex elements of learning to write essays within a particular discipline: the challenge of finding one’s own voice, of learning to think like a historian or an archaeologist, and of making the process of writing an authentic artefact of one’s own understanding.

**Tutors’ aims and approaches**

It emerged from the interviews with tutors that there is not a shared language for talking about how tutors and students interact with each other about students’ written work. Even the word ‘assessment’ is used in fairly idiosyncratic ways. Some tutors saw it as a matter of giving a grade to a piece of work. Others saw assessment as separate from the thinking process that goes on in relation to the student essay.

*A big concern for me is that they [the students] recognise that the essay is not about being assessed, but about organising thinking and a platform for historical discussion. Therefore it is inappropriate to assess it.* [HT]

In this conception assessment constrains learning and is characterised by passivity on the part of the student. For other tutors assessment was defined as written comment on structure and style and correcting errors:

*the important thing there is historical discussion. I would keep assessment to absolute minimum. My gut feeling is it will inhibit free discourse.* [HT]

This last view seems to imply a definition of assessment that is generic and related to essay writing as technique that is divorced from the practice of history as a discipline. The possibility that free discourse may entail assessment of the quality of arguments within the dialogue between tutor and student is not a part of this tutors’ conception of assessment. However, these views are not interpreted as rejections of wider definitions of assessment but
rather as a discomfort with what might have seemed an artificial separation of one aspect of teaching as though it were a stand-alone end in itself. There is an extent to which a discussion of assessment risks disaggregating, artificially, the components of learning and teaching.

Interestingly, there was not the same level of discomfort with the language of assessment among the archaeology tutors but a similar concern about the need to retain a secure space in which students could take intellectual risks was evident among all tutors.

This concern was central to most tutors’ practice of not giving grades on tutorial essays:

> I wouldn’t want ever to penalise somebody for trying something new and not entirely succeeding. [AT]

Tutors saw the conditions in which tutorial and exam essays are produced as very different and so grades for tutorial essays would be confusing [HT, AT]. Grading was seen as a pointless game [AT], arbitrary [HT], and as a practice that distracted students’ attention away from comments [HT]. In addition, less experienced tutors did not feel sufficiently familiar with a broad enough range of students’ work to enable them to give grades.

Some tutors described the process of giving feedback in terms of demonstrating, rather than telling. One tutor described how he always asked students to critique his own alternative structure for an essay question. Another tutor emphasised the need to ensure that students understood how she had arrived at her comments:

> I would like to be able to tell them that it needs to be changed and to demonstrate to them why I think it needs to be changed. I don’t want to lead them ... I want to show them not only how to change but why I think it has to be changed ... otherwise it might seem a bit arbitrary [AT]

The tutor’s wish to make explicit her rationale makes it possible for students to disagree with her comments and to develop their own capacity to assess. The process was perceived as reciprocal one: the student must demonstrate the validity of an argument in an essay and the tutor must demonstrate too the rationale for a comment on the essay.

How tutors brought together the students’ essays and the tutorial varied considerably. A minority of tutors asked students to read out their essays for discussion within the tutorial. As well as seeing this as a means of starting with the students’ own arguments, tutors cited lack of time and lack of pay as reasons for hearing essays without taking them in afterwards. Conversely, several tutors had consciously decided not to have essays read out. Their various rationales were that they could not master the argument by listening; and they offered a longer discussion by not having it read out. One disliked the practice because he had got nothing from being taught that way himself and another because she had no experience of being taught that way. However, the essay was still used as a focal point in the tutorial in that students were asked to give a summary of their essay and this was seen as affording some practice in oral presentation of an argument.

In one case students were asked to swap essay plans with each other and to discuss their structures in preparation for the tutorial. It was often the case that tutors let students’ essays determine the ground to be covered in the tutorial. Sometimes the students’ arguments were closely analysed as it was read out, paragraph by paragraph; whilst in another instance the essay is used as a starting point for students to initiate discussion on those issues they are most confused about.
Getting students to hand in essays a day in advance of the tutorial was perceived as a way of allowing the knowledge to settle down a little bit [AT] and made the discussion much more fruitful and they learn more [AT]. Several tutors observed that students sometimes develop their thinking beyond the essay by the time of the tutorial, so the tutor is not just commenting on their argument in the essay but also on the elaboration of that argument that they’re making in the tutorial [HT].

**Students’ perceptions of tutors’ feedback**

Whilst discussion of essays was appreciated by students, across all year groups it was written comments that were most valued. They were of interest in their own right, but rarely did students see these as relevant to their next essay. Most typically the written comments were thought to be useful for developing the essay subject during revision. Suggestions of reading to cover issues that they had missed or alternative arguments were especially valued, as were extended explanations of the positions of different writers in a seminal debate to which reference had been made during a tutorial.

A few students expressed concerns about the promptness of tutors’ comments on essays:

> I’m still waiting to get an essay back from last term and I’ve done a collection on that paper, so that is bad. The thing is I have to revise on that topic without having any feedback on that topic, which I find bad. [H3]

More often students wanted a greater level of detail in comments: in particular they valued comments that included rationale rather than simply prescriptive advice:

> She’s got here about structure, which I knew partly … at times I didn’t know where to put bits of information I wanted to put in …. I remember in archaeology last year … I wanted to put in something about aerial photography, which is pretty fundamental … and I couldn’t decide where to put it. … and my tutor said it was tacked on—which I agreed with! But the point was I didn’t know where else to put it and s/he just said it was tacked on - which wasn’t particularly useful because I already knew that. [A2]

Many students were anxious to receive tutor comments on their work and appreciated detailed written comment when they got it:

> we had a tutor who gave us two sides of typed A4 feedback on every essay you did which was absolutely fantastic [A3].

The need for tutors’ comment is related to a desire by students to be enabled to improve and to have tutors expressing higher expectations of them:

> I just feel that sometimes she doesn't give an overall 'yes, you’ve improved everything’ or 'this was good but you should have talked about other things’... it would be more helpful if she did because sometimes s/he says it’s fine but then she hasn’t said what else should be in it. [A3]

With few exceptions, those who received consistent written feedback were most confident about their progress. The best feedback gives you:

> specific things to read or to research which suggest that you haven’t done your essay wrong but they were things they didn’t ask you to do in the first place but that you could do now that you know more [A1].
When feedback is exclusively verbal or always in the context of a wider-than-the-essay historical/archaeological discussion, students do not necessarily interpret this as a form of feedback. One third year historian perceived that he 'never' got feedback and was asking tutors for specific feedback after not receiving it during the tutorial. It was evident in this case that whilst written and verbal comments on his essays were given by tutors they were not understood to constitute feedback by the student.

Symbols such as question marks, exclamation marks and ticks were often incomprehensible to students and were described as useless. Moreover, when these were offered in the absence of written comment, students assumed that the tutor ‘didn’t care’ and felt demotivated as a result. Short questions such as how do we know? and one or two word statements, like 'too tentative', were somewhat opaque to students because they could not necessarily work out to what such statements referred. More complex misunderstandings emerged from the lack of shared meanings for words that tutors can take for granted. For example, a tutor had written 'need to do more to support [your] claim' on an essay to which the student’s response was that:

this is 2800 words of detail, so I have supported a few claims I’ve made. I'm not sure that I really understand the point that he's trying to make there. [H2]

It was not clear in the interview that the student understood what constituted a ‘claim’ or to which of the student’s claims the tutor’s comment referred.

Students tended to disregard a tutor’s comments when they did not connect with, or seemed inimical to their own assessment of the essay. For example, a second year historian dismissed a tutor’s written comments as inconsequentia because they did not connect with her experience of difficulties in writing the essay. The tutor did not recognise that it was all based on panic. Later in the year this student was being taught by an amazing tutor who was conscientious with us and also very sharp, she could tell immediately when she read the essay ... what you were doing. She gave explicit written feedback and recognised her problems with preparation. However, there were indications that the interaction, and the interplay with the student’s motivation were more complex. The student said she was now feeling guilty that she was just taking the Mickey out of this really good tutor by not doing anything, but equally it was ... nice.[H2]

When tutor comments do not connect with the student’s own assessment and they lack a clear rationale, students can develop a lack of confidence in the basis upon which assessments are being made. Several students were wary of praise that appeared indiscriminate.

he’s quite glowing but you don’t know really whether he’s just the kind of person who glows about everything.[A2]

An absence of comment about changes that students perceive themselves to be making, was also discouraging. One student had changed her style and observed that no comment had been made about the change. The student’s assumption was that her tutors had noticed the change and were deliberately not commenting on it. The extent to which tutor’s comments, their content, and their absence, have an impact on the motivational life of students cannot be exaggerated. The extent to which feedback matters to students seems to be an intrinsic part of the relationship between students and tutors. We will address, in the forthcoming sections on self-assessment, development, and talking to others, the ways in which tutor feedback can be put into perspective.
Finding your own voice, plagiarism and originality

Students’ use of the phrase ‘own voice’, suggests that there are several possible interpretations which seem to reflect their intellectual development and their beliefs about knowledge.

The first interpretation focuses on preparation that results in a special blend of existing arguments:

*originality comes out in the way you blend the arguments.* [H3]

A first year commented that one’s own opinion was reached by taking one piece of a historian’s argument and putting it with another but stopped short of the idea of forming her own argument in her own words. An anxiety about plagiarism was associated with this form of finding ones own voice: *I’m quite conscious of that at the moment, it’s so easy to plagiarise* [H1]. Some second and third years were categorical that it was impossible to produce an argument *that no one has ever thought of*[A2, H3].

However, there was evidence of frustration with:

...rehashing and restructuring and reorganising, I’m not having any ideas apart from organisational ideas and to have good ideas you need some kind of base that you understand very well. ... the complaint that everyone I know makes is that we can’t have original ideas because you read the criticism and the criticism and the criticism and there’s nothing left for us to say.[A2]

For some students coming to understand what it means to express original ideas within the discipline was fraught with mixed signals from tutors:

*it’s quite strange though because he says he wants an argument but then he says he doesn’t want too much of our own opinions so I’m not quite sure where he’s coming from ... maybe by an argument he means just have a stance all the way through*[A2].

There was some evidence that the Archaeology students would sometimes develop a different notion of what it means to find one’s own voice in Anthropology. There was a perception among some that Archaeology was less intellectually challenging, by which they seemed to mean it was more difficult to create personal opinions and the reading was more heavily based on secondary sources:

*the questions are more, maybe not so much posing problems that you have to think about, but showing that you have gained an understanding of ... what other people have thought about it and written about it*[A2]

*with this one [archaeological essay] you just have to mention all the sites ... but with Social Anthropology I would be disappointed with the essay if I didn’t feel as though I’d find something original to say.* [A1]

The difficulties for archaeologists in developing their own perspectives centred on the interpretation of site reports, and the demands of integrating data with theory. For the historians it was their engagement with historiography that brought into sharp focus the challenges of finding their own voices. Some first years, in particular, presented engagement with historiography as the opposite of forming their own views. One said:

*My tutor, I don’t think he likes the use of historiography, he wants your own opinion. But it can’t be your own opinion, you’re influenced*[H1].
This confusion was sometimes compounded by students’ interpretation of tutors’ comments. For example, one third year historian was wary of referring to historiography since a tutor’s comment that he ‘hid behind’ other historians’ arguments instead of saying what he thought.

The second interpretation of finding one’s own voice denotes some new formulation of the students’ own views and their imposition on material within the discipline. An essay needs:

- a unique idea, which is not just an amalgamation of the content of books. I don’t struggle after a completely new answer, but somewhere I have taken on the broader content and found something I think is particularly relevant and worked all the arguments through in my mind and found what I think is best. [H2]

Both of the above interpretations are focused on the process of preparing an essay and the influence of this process in developing the students’ understanding of new material in their own terms.

The third interpretation of own voice focused on the impact on the reader and on the relationship of the argument to the debate within which it is situated: finding one’s own voice means formulating an argument that is recognised as being distinctive, provocative, challenging, ambitious, and controversial. A third year historian said that an essay should present the points:

- slightly controversially, explaining that I don’t mean anything really profound ... I suppose by controversial I mean by going for a different argument ... that could still be arguing the point of another historian that you’ve read, which is more unusual or less widely accepted. [H3]

Another said it was:

- challenging the assumptions of the question, you know, offering a twist, thinking out of the box perhaps. [H3]

This interpretation is centred upon the impact on the reader of the essay and the implication is that the reader is the examiner looking for evidence of the student’s ‘flair’ and capacity to take risks. The previous variations of meaning are less context-specific.

The task of situating one’s own voice within those of other scholars is of course related to attribution of ideas and plagiarism. Students rarely mentioned referencing and bibliographies as features of ‘good essays’. One tutor found it very difficult to get students to provide either. She praised an essay that provided footnotes but commented that:

- he’s relatively unusual; he has honestly acknowledged his debts to these writers. Because I think, because of the rush of writing, there’s an awful lot of what I would call soft plagiarism in Oxford undergraduates’ writing, not an outright lifting of passages, but unattributed lifting of argument, which probably reflects the fact that these students do not know a tremendous amount about the subject matter...So I’m not suggesting that they’re dishonest. But because they’re having to write a lot quickly about a subject they’ve not been exposed to before, they necessarily rely quite heavily on the authors that they’ve read [HT]

When students were required to follow referencing conventions, they invariably found the process dramatically improved the quality of their engagement and their capacity to think like historians/archaelogists:

- I know some students may think its quite petty and non-specific, but I think it does actually shape the way you write your essay ... if you realise that your entire page is
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*just a list of copied down ideas then you need to go away and do some thinking and come up with something new*[H3].

However, the expectation that references would be part of essay preparation was not consistent among all tutors. This particular student reverted to hand-written essays with her next tutor because:

*she’s ... laid back or maybe quite laissez faire about the whole essay process, I don’t think she necessarily demands elaborate footnotes and they might look a little bit presumptuous or something to try and whack some in.*[H3]

There was evidence that fully referenced essays with a bibliography, which tend to be required in more advanced papers, had a role in helping students to develop their own voice. One student felt that this requirement in a special subject in history left him less likely to *blag*, to assimilate other historians’ ideas as if they were his own anymore and forced him to think more.

**Learning to write: the developmental process**

**Developments over the course of a year**

Students were fairly reticent about changes between their first and second interviews. When they did talk about change it was often in a detached way:

*one thing I have noticed is that these seem to be getting longer* [H2]

*it [my style of writing] always seems to be changing ... I’ll just find that I’ve written a very different essay* [A1].

This language suggests that development may be taking place intuitively, not in an articulate, premeditated fashion. Nevertheless, some changes were discernible through comparisons between the two sets of interviews. A dominant pattern was a move from indiscriminate use of various strategies toward a more selective and economic approach. For example note-taking moved from being a superficial or mechanical activity towards one that involved ‘thinking all the time’. This first year was somewhat exceptional in being able to articulate how her essay-writing had developed:

*I do find writing an essay just easier. In general I find that I have to read less material to get out an essay of the same standard, which is perhaps a good thing. But I do make use of material better now, plus my writing standard in general, because I’ve done a lot of reading since we last spoke, my essay standard has improved a lot since then*’. [H1]

The changes seemed to be associated with growing confidence in their own ability to cope with demands, their knowledge of what was being asked of them - *I’ve figured out what’s required* [A1] - and increasing familiarity with their subject. By the end of their second year, students’ strategies seemed to have settled down and most were more confident and in control of their own work. By the end of the third year work patterns seemed to become engrained *I found the trick that worked for me* [A3], though at this stage they were increasingly focussing on how to produce work that will be useful for the exams rather than just for the short-term goal of the essay in question. Two students had adopted strategies geared to achieving a first: for one this was the adoption of a more challenging and ambitious style in essay writing; and for the other it was suggesting in her essays ways in which the literature should develop. The tutor, who was also interviewed, explained that she
encouraged good students to do this and interestingly the student saw it as her own initiative.

Alongside increasing selectivity, students were conscious that their writing was becoming more personal. Occasionally, this was prompted by responses to tutor feedback: for example one student reported she had ‘given way’ to her tutor to write simpler essays and that this ‘freed [her] up’ to follow her own lines of thinking. Other students seemed to be evolving their own methods independently of tutor comment having now developed an understanding of they were aiming for. One had started to write essays without first looking through his notes and found that this produced a more original essay. Another was deliberately typing up her notes at the end of each day to edit waffle and was typing half a side outlining each author’s general line in preparation for exams. She felt that this released her to spend more time on finding her own ideas.

**Comparisons between first, second and third year students**

Comparing students’ responses across the three year groups does not demonstrate a developmental process because the differences could be related to many factors other than the year of the student’s degree course. That is not to say that development does not take place but rather that our data cannot demonstrate it conclusively. In the absence of a longitudinal study, however, it is useful to explore the characteristics that distinguish first, from second, and second from third years.

Some differences were evident in attitudes to the level of guidance provided for essays. Many first years described the level of guidance as very low. They tended to comment on the ‘culture shock’ [A1, H1] of having to teach themselves, instead of being directed as they were at school and rarely saw tutors’ recommendation of books as guidance, unless this entailed explicit discussion of specific approaches to a new topic. A common comment was: *they just give you a reading list and don’t tell you anything else.*[A1] A few, however, expressed the desire to read books outside those recommended by tutors.

Third year students and some second years tended to recognise tutor guidance as its significance was becoming more apparent to them. Some finalists also talked in terms of managing their tutors, whether in terms of when they wanted reading lists to be given out, or the type of questions they wanted to be set. However, this was rare and most students seemed to remain sensitive to and dependent upon tutors’ encouragement of them in this role.

First years often adopted a technical approach to assembling information for essays. This was an experimental period in many cases, although experimentation might often be related to only one aspect of the process. They often had an idea of the ‘correct’ way to take notes and observed that essay-planning was recommended, but several claimed that they failed to achieve these techniques. Second years were far more likely to be actively seeking to adapt or change their approach, sometimes succeeding and sometimes not. Many historians doing special subjects with extensive primary sources were continuing to adapt, because they had to deal with the new problem of getting the balance right between primary and secondary sources.

Students’ description of the criteria for a good essay broadened in range and sophistication over the three years of their degree courses. Criteria were more integrated, extended and expressed in more sophisticated and abstract ways in later years. First years discussed the criteria as separate. They saw the need for a running theme and talked about knowing that
they should use their own argument. Several second years used the terms challenging and strong when describing argument. They were more inclined to describe the ‘flow’ as integrated into the structure and content of the essay, for example to show early on what conclusion they would come to, or by talking about driving themes with one central argument, rather than simply linking paragraphs. The words *original* and *different* cropped up more often. Third years often had a more abstract, broader and integrated range of criteria. Their terms included: unfolding argument, analysis, contextualised, interesting. They saw clear, fluent prose style as a way to further the argument, making it more persuasive. It is worth noting that at least one first year had a similar level of insight.

Students’ understandings of the tutorial’s role in providing feedback also differ over the three years. Some first years did not identify the tutorial as an opportunity for feedback, seeing it only as a general discussion of the subject. Only one first year explicitly described the tutorial as extensive feedback. More second and third years, however, integrated oral and written feedback into their descriptions. Third years, for example, paraphrased their tutor’s verbal essay-specific comments, writing them onto their essays. A third year described the relationship between essay and tutorial as a *dialogue between the two*. There were exceptions, and they were often students who expressed most dissatisfaction with their own progress. Third year students often situated the type of comment they had received within the varied tutorial approaches that were available to them. Though they often had preferences for one particular approach to feedback and the use of tutorial time, they had learned different things in different situations and for some this was recognised as a way to build up a repertoire of expertise. In some cases a new tutor’s novel approach can trigger far-reaching developments for some students. This seems to suggest that the diversity of forms of tutorials is central to students’ developmental experience.

When students act on tutors’ comments they rarely do so in a predictable pattern or timetable. By the end of their first year, students are often in the process of effecting change but have not yet done so to their own satisfaction. It is as though their capacity to recognise what makes a good essay proceeds faster than their capacity to enact what they have understood. The process of interpreting what a tutor’s comment means can be a protracted one:

*I still sometimes don’t have a strong argument... In a way you do say what you want to say... but I don’t think it’s what my tutor meant by a strong argument*. [A1]

For some students this continues in the second year. One Archaeologist was wrestling with the balance between theory and case-studies and was still doing so at the end of the second year.

*I try to integrate theories with the evidence ... but I’m still not sure I get there half the time.* [A2]

However, most second years displayed more understanding of why they are being encouraged to do certain things.

*I used to approach [essays] with a page on theory and then I’d see why the examples are associated with the theory, but not enough to be able to talk about it point by point [but if you don’t] you’re not really proving you know why you have those examples with that particular theory.* [A2]

And finding a way to integrate his own perspective within his essays, another student also acknowledged a time lag between understanding that he needed to do this and being able to do it:
it's always been encouraged ... it takes a while for you to be able to ... do it yourself.  
[A2]

Finalists are more in command of their own work and attribute changes to their own actions such as further reading and practice. Furthermore, finalists showed some evidence of decreasing dependence on tutor's judgements of their work and increasing confidence in their own assessments. Some pushed this to point of cynicism about their tutor's comments: a tutor was thought to have made positive comments about an essay:  
possibly because I reproduced his lectures, there's lots of theory in it, there's lots of sites in it, it addresses the question and it's not too boring'[A3]

And the point of integrating archaeology with anthropology was:  
because that's how you're going to score brownie points. [A3]

To some extent these responses can be interpreted in the context of approaching finals exams and the adoption of a pragmatic strategy. More evidence for the growing confidence of finalists comes from how they deal with differences between their own and their tutors’ perception about the quality of essays. Whereas first and second years tend to find disagreement disorientating, or as discussed above can become dismissive, finalists are more inclined to defend their opinions and to question those of their tutor’s. One student thought an essay was too long, particularly for the purposes of revision, whereas the tutor suggested more information to add but the student rejected this 'I don't think that'll really work for me' and though the length was praised by the tutor, the student still 'wasn't that impressed with it.[H3]

As students progress, they learn to relate the topic they are studying to other elements of the course. Sometimes first years talk about this, usually in terms of information learnt in one essay which is directly relevant to another on the same topic.  
I make more links in my essay ... you can kind of see how things interrelate more ... you can see the broader picture. [A1]

However, there were some first and second year students for whom the suggestion that the comments on one essay might be applicable to the next, seemed new and possibly unrealistic. A first year said,  
I won't respond to them. I think that essay is over, that's what I've done wrong, I won't extract any lessons from them [H1]

The difficulties of generalising from specific feedback on one essay to other essays were complex. In some instances students could not see the commonalities between essays and could only discern a mass of  
different essays [that] had different ideas and therefore different structures'. [H2]

For some students, who recognised common patterns in their essays, and in the feedback they received, the barrier was a logistical rather than conceptual one. It was a matter of prioritising the need make extra time to put something different into practice over the need to assimilate new material.

The capacity to see links between essays and to situate them within their own wholistic understanding of the subject becomes more prominent in the second year. Several students talked about feeling more confident about the subject and in their own opinions:
you can’t really offer your own interpretation [to begin with] because you don’t know enough about what’s been said ... but I think you can do that now and to kind of understand what the point might be not within ... the essay, but how it fits in with everything else I know.[A2]

it’s coming all together now, you couldn’t really see the connections before you did the whole course [H2].

For one student the essay was very much a means for the ultimate end of understanding rather than end in itself:
there’s a risk of focussing on the essay and you lose what you’re supposed to be doing more generally. [A3]

**Talking with others**

In a collegiate university where the number of students per tutor is comparatively low, where the tutor-student relationship is a central element of undergraduate education, and where considerable resources are invested in helping individuals to give of their best and fulfil their potential, the role of the peer and collaboration can seem somewhat marginal. This is especially so when the Oxford environment is placed in the national and international higher education contexts in which universities are struggling to maintain personal contact between lecturers and students; and where groupwork and peer assessment are commonplace. How and what students learn from each other within these two disciplines at Oxford was not the focus of this study as a whole but some questions were asked about how students interacted with their peers with respect to their essay-writing.

**Discussion outside the tutorial**

On the whole, there seemed to be a greater level of interaction among the archaeologists than the historians. Among the archaeologists a wide range of experience was evident: from no discussion with peers outside tutorials to the holding of informal ‘mini-tutorials’. From the end of the first year, discussion seemed to be more about how to approach essays and problematic points than the logistics of getting books. Interaction decreased in the second year with time pressure often cited as the reason, though perhaps it may also be about growing confidence and development of individual work patterns. Those who do collaborate see the differences between essays in a more constructive way, as having an influence on their work rather than just another source of information:

information ... and structure... I consciously look for that now because I just wanted to see how people write essays [A1].

One student was highly influenced by the experience of working directly with other students for a joint presentation:
we came up with a new model ... which I would never have done on my own’[A2].

As finals approach, many third years swap essays for revision and two thought other students had specific things to offer: he [the tutorial partner] knows me better so he knows exactly my level of understanding. This was contrasted with a more distant relationship with tutors in which there tends to be a bit of deference. [A3]

Among the historians essays were discussed with other students insofar as they share books or discuss their progress in general ways but rarely did they share ideas about the questions
raised by the essays. Similarly, tutors’ saw the benefits of student interaction in terms of students getting better access to reading material in preparation for essays.

However, despite the general level of lower interaction, considerable variation of experience was found among the historians. At one end of the scale two students who felt it was impossible to work collaboratively and never talked to anyone tended to do papers with tutorial partners who were not well known to them. In contrast one second year’s tutorial group consisted of friends who emailed essays to each other after the tutorial for revision purposes. Where students had little knowledge of their peers’ work they often seemed to worry about how they compared. Other students were seen to be faster with reading, note taking and writing, or to do more reading. Those who regularly swapped and discussed essays seemed to gain some sense of security from being familiar with other students’ work.

In some colleges students talked to those in the year above them who had already done the paper. This was perhaps influenced by their college structure and size. Where no discussion was taking place outside of tutorial, this was sometimes explained as being because tutorial partners were from different colleges.

Discussion within the tutorial
Most students were prepared to listen to their peers within the tutorial and to note comments that they made. In many instances, they used the tutor as a filter, to determine the veracity of the point or information offered by their peer.

*I just wouldn’t take some of their essays as, as a kind of gospel truth…it would be a tutor’s response to them that is useful* [H2]

Several historians emphasised that while getting an impression of diversity is useful, as is getting new perspectives on material, learning from the tutor is more important. One first year said:

*in general I find that more than interaction with students, I find the interaction with the tutor a lot more important*. [H1]

The implication here is that at least some students do not feel confident of their own capacity to evaluate the merits of each others’ arguments; and moreover are happy to take at face value the tutor’s evaluation and see it as incontestable.

Though some students disliked reading out essays in front of other students because they found it embarrassing, many claimed that this gave them an overview of the variety of approaches that other students take and to see that they arose from the same material.

There was more evidence of self-assessment being prompted by interaction within the tutorial rather than interest in the approaches of others for its own sake. One second year student felt that reading out the essay in front of other students forced him to actively analyse his own work and to make it more interesting for others to listen to. Another second year historian was unusual in observing that it was useful to see if she could respond to other students’ challenges of her ideas.

There was a tendency to be more positive about the benefits of hearing/reading other students’ work by the third years. Tutors also identified gains in verbal performance, listening skills and engagement with a wider diversity of arguments arising from student interaction. One said
Tutors did not see many benefits in terms of essay writing: "they get a lot from each others’ presence in the tutorial, but this is only indirectly related to the essay." History tutors identified that in some instances students appeared not to listen to each other. This was largely attributed to confidence and temperament. Though some also saw the failure to interact verbally as the result of lack of experience because students are not taught enough in classes. All tutors wished to see a move towards more class teaching and oral presentation work. One commented: "I think the danger is that in one-to-one tutorials there is not a proper discussion or interaction between students ... there is no discussion culture." Several tutors described how they make use of the presence of two or more students in a tutorial to shape discussion. For example, a tutor might discuss issues arising from one of the essays; encourage the students to swap essay plans in order to help them think about structuring arguments: "I’ll say, ‘well what’s so-and-so arguing, what’s s/he saying, what’s the gist of this, what order does s/he put on all that evidence?’" Students were also encouraged to debate on the basis of reading different books or to writing different but complementary essays. Several tutors commented that such interaction worked best when students took different positions in relation to a question, "because sometimes you can just sit back and let them get on with it ... that’s very satisfying to see them so involved." However, many tutors also thought such interaction was hard to achieve, not least because students are reluctant to engage in it: "they don’t like commenting on each other’s work ... because they think they’re shopping their own tutorial partner’, ‘they think that learning is done from the tutor, not with the tutor almost. I haven’t quite cracked it’.

Good pairings were often characterised as not too competitive. When it was possible to bring about such interaction, tutors saw numerous benefits. At the most basic level there were logistical gains in that they could cover more material and brief each other when they have done different reading. A similar pooling of perspectives can occur when they have different perspectives as a result of having taken different papers that are relevant. There were a number of discipline-specific skills that could be fostered such as learning how to structure their essays, to assemble a logical argument and especially to communicate that. It was thought that students could learn from the feedback given to other students in a number of ways: first in terms of its substantive content but also in terms of how to discuss things without criticising people ..., they need this as a transferable skill. And finally, it was felt that the presence of other students made tutorials less intimidating; "they’re in it together."
finding it quite hard to talk to anyone else about the essays because I’m still feeling a bit horrible about them, I’m finding it so hard. And also you feel a bit cheeky when you don’t know them that well. [A1]

This student’s last comment indicates that she say the reading of other students’ essays as an imposition on those students, almost as though she were stealing their work. This view was prevalent among both subject groups:

I’d far rather produce my own ideas, however bad they are, so I try not to discuss the essay with other people [H2].

In contrast, another student said that she used other students’ essays in revision, treating them as she would another historian’s ideas [H1]. As well as lack of confidence, trust, and a conception of collaboration as a form of cheating, there were other reasons for not discussing work. One rather despairing student said that he’d tried but that no-one else was interested in doing so. For some students the experience of talking with others about essays was far from constructive:

the main thing to talk about is to scare each other about what we don’t really know ... it doesn’t really help a great deal.[H3]

History tutors’ opinions differed about getting students to read each others’ essays. One asked students to exchange essays as a matter of routine. She felt it was useful because it lightened the load of getting through the reading of primary documents in further subjects. Another was doubtful about the practice. She thought it could work if a good essay was given as an example to a ‘poorer student’. Yet she believed that

if you exchange ideas, one runs the danger ... that you will get some kind of competition between students – "why does he not say this essay is actually worse than mine"... and "why doesn’t he tell me this essay is well done ... And I could imagine that that happens and that would not be very good and people would start concentrating on how to please the tutor and basically how to be better than the others rather than actually improving their own intellectual abilities.[HT]

One tutor described the act of swapping essays as deplorable because students did not read each other’s essays critically.

There was also evidence of history tutors attempting to get students interested in each other’s essays through the way they structured tutorials. One student compared a traditional single tutorial with one in which there were four students who all read each other’s essays beforehand. Their essays were on different subjects, which meant that the tutorial had to focus on the essays and, as the student saw it, could not look more generally at the subject/period. The student found it difficult to comment on the other students’ essays, because he could not give an honest opinion about their work.

I think I probably didn’t take that much away from the [latter method of] tutorials ... it wasn’t a learning environment really ... it meant they were in a way just a kind of essay discussion group rather than a tutorial. I think a tutorial should ... range around the topic a lot more. [H2]

What is interesting here is that the student could not conceive of the discussion of other essay topics tackled by fellow students as comprising an opportunity to broaden his knowledge and capacity for critique. There was reluctance to trust his own judgement and to test it out in discussion with his peers.
Tutors also were reluctant to engage in critical discussion of students’ essays in tutorials with more than one student. This seems to reinforce students’ scant knowledge of each other’s work. Only one tutor felt able to talk about the strengths and weaknesses of students’ essays in tutorials and humour was used to diffuse any awkwardness. The other tutors preferred to point out deficiencies, in particular, in written comment or in one-to-one tutorials. One tutor would ask a student to stay behind if it was necessary to comment. The rationale offered was that:

> in Oxford they are very achievement orientated young people – they don’t know much ultimately about their peers, so would feel vulnerable about being criticised in front of other students’. [HT]

Similarly, an archaeology tutor felt that discussion of students essays that were of different standards within the tutorial was:

> probably very beneficial for those who are doing well and are keen but I don’t really see its benefit for those who aren’t. It may well be they can sponge off others but I don’t necessarily think that’s beneficial in terms of their personal development. [AT]

The concern here seems to be with ensuring that students are intrinsically motivated by the intellectual content of their study and are not distracted by a form of competition that might hinder their progress. There is a concern too that an unfavourable comparison with a peer will damage a students’ confidence and capacity to fulfil their own potential. It is almost as though the ideal is a one-to-one tutorial and the presence of the second student is treated as interference.
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Formative assessment literature is full of general precepts such as: the need to use explicit assessment criteria; the value of specific, timely feedback; comments which are properly explained; advice on style and structure rather than content; and the benefits of involving students in the assessment of their own work. The recommendations here do not seek to reproduce all of that advice – even though much of it is reinforced by our findings – rather they focus on context-specific aspects of learning, teaching and assessment, as evidenced in this study, within the School of Archaeology and the Faculty of History at Oxford.

Issues to consider at the level of tutor-student interaction

The following points on aspects of tutor-student interaction encompass not only assessment of how a student has done in a particular essay but also the exploration of the student’s understanding of the topic that the essay has addressed. In other words, the essay is conceptualised as an artefact of the student’s learning, a means of diagnosis that is a starting point for the development of understanding in the course of tutorial discussion and beyond.

The findings indicate that students’ essay-writing benefits from explicit discussion of the process of essay-writing and the rationale for tutor actions such as what reading is suggested or how an essay is treated. Some questions for discussion between tutors and students are set out below. These are not exhaustive but indicative of the factors that seemed to underlie students’ attempts to improve their essay writing, their understanding of what it means to write as students of Archaeology or History, and their capacity to make the most of their interaction with tutors. Tutors may wish to give some thought to the optimum timing for such discussions: some questions might form part of the orientation of new students whilst others might usefully be discussed in the context of a mid-term review of progress, or at collections or in the discussion of revision strategies before the first public examination.

What are tutorial essays for? (pp 5-9, 11-12)
How do you use the reading list? What did you find difficult, and why? (pp 11-14)
What is the relationship between tutorial essays and examination essays? (pp 5-6)
What do you think makes a good Archaeology/History essay? (pp 6-9)
How do you think you are doing on each of the aspects you mention? (6-9)
What did you make of my comments on this essay? (pp 9-10)

Students sometimes fail to see the relevance of what they call the ‘general discussion’ (ie the usually tutor-led discussion of the general topic rather than specific feedback) on their essay. Although tutors see these discussions as critical in developing a depth of understanding and the capacity to place the essay topic in a wider context, they could be made more effective if they were more explicitly linked to the students’ own contributions.

There is a time delay between students’ appreciation of an assessment criterion and their capacity to apply it. This period of dissonance seems to be an intrinsic feature of the way students develop fluency and conceptual understanding in the discipline. Several practical points emerge for this:
A lack of immediate action on feedback is not necessarily a sign of ineffective feedback or of students’ disregard of feedback.

The provision of examples of essays alongside discussion of assessment criteria and opportunities for practice may help students through this period of dissonance. Discussion based on sample essays can, for example, illuminate for students possible ways of balancing the use of theory and case studies, an issue with which many Archaeologists struggled.

Alternatively, part of the tutorial could be given over to discussions of a variety of possible structures in relation to a particular question, or a demonstration of the ways in which a specific component of the essay might be addressed (eg use of primary material or the role of Historiography in History, the role of the site report in Archaeology) might more successfully be applied.

Students seem to benefit from tutors’ feedback when the tutor is explicit about:

- the rationale for why some comments are written and others discussed; and
- the intended relevance for practice: for example, it is not always obvious to students when advice is intended to be generalised to subsequent essays or is specific to the topic under discussion.

The promotion of self-assessment existed to varying degrees. Ultimately students are their own ‘first examiners’. The comments they receive from anyone else about their work only constitute ‘feedback’ if they enter into students’ own views about how they have done. Encouraging self-assessment is therefore not so much a new aspect of practice as simply a means of inviting students to hold up to critical examination thought processes that should already be taking place.

The simplest means of encouraging self-assessment is through informal questions during tutorial: How do you think you did? What was particularly good? Are there areas you found difficult?

A more formal, structured method is to ask students to assess their own essays in advance of the tutorial using a coversheet that requires them to comment on the extent to which they have fulfilled particular assessment criteria. This is a tool that can be adapted to suit the stage of development that a student has reached. As students progress their need to be provided with structure decreases and their capacity to direct their own work (and associated needs for feedback) increases. So, for example, a student in her final year could not only use a coversheet of this type but might construct the assessment criteria herself.

**Discipline-specific issues**

Students are making sense of Archaeology as a discipline both in relation to subjects they have studied at school and then, after their arrival, in relation to (primarily in our sample) Anthropology. Their reflections on their experience of the variation between these disciplines seem rarely to have been critically discussed. Tutors may wish to consider when and how such discussion might be appropriate. (see below on the use of classes).

Students in History appeared to be more resistant to learning from their peers than those in Archaeology. This is an area on which more work should be done, but it probably reflects
institutional differences in the organisation of the subjects as well as the fact that the novelty of Archaeology fosters habits of mutual support.

**Issues to consider at School/Faculty level**

There is potential benefit in further dissemination of the project findings within the School of Archaeology and the Faculty of History among all those who teach. Within the School of Archaeology, it is suggested that the Tutors’ Forum be invited to convene a meeting to explore and debate the issues raised in the report. The discussions that have taken place among tutors in the History Faculty might be repeated for new colleagues or those who were unable to attend previously.

Some of the project materials should be fed into teaching development sessions for new academics and graduates.

There is an awareness of the existence of handbooks and other written guidance but not much recollection of what it says. It seems that, however good its quality, it does not work as ‘stand alone’ provision. Timely discussion of the written guidance may help students realise its significance. In what context are the handbooks intended to be used? The answer to this question may suggest changes to the content and distribution of the handbooks.

There is a need to explore ways in which students can be a resource for promoting each others’ learning. At present this happens informally (and perhaps more in Archaeology than in History). On the whole the awareness of possibilities seems limited among students and patchy among tutors.

Among the possibilities are the pre-circulation of essays within the tutorial group; more group work within the tutorial framework; more formal exercises such as taking sides in a debate.

These findings are relevant to discussions that have begun and will continue to take place at undergraduate programme level about pedagogic methods and the relative functions of lectures, classes and tutorials.

If policy decisions are taken at a School and Faculty levels about the role of classes, and their increased use then developmental support could be planned with the Learning Institute.
## APPENDIX 1: INTERVIEWS WITH STUDENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analysis questions</th>
<th>Interview Questions for students</th>
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| **What is student’s strategy?** | What guidance [advice/stuff to go on] did you have apart from the essay question itself?  
Tell me how you went about preparing this essay? [Take student through the different elements of this question]  
- How did you use the reading list?  
- Tell me about how you take notes.  
- At what point did you start writing?  
- Tell me about how you wrote this essay.  
- Did you discuss the essay with anyone?  
How typical is this of the way you go about preparing essays? |
| **What is student’s conception of a good essay?** | What do you think the point of doing the essay is?  
What makes a good essay?  
Probe words/phrases student comes up with but do not introduce any prompts:  
Eg- argument; balance of argument and evidence; historiography; relevance; structure  
Can you show me an example of where you’ve done that in your essay?  
Can you tell me how you’ve done that in this essay?  
Is there anything else that you think makes a good essay?  
Where do you get your ideas from about what makes a good essay? [Offer options: A-Level experience, handbooks, tutor guidance, faculty guidance in handbook, other students] |
| **How is student interpreting their feedback?**  
- From tutor  
- From other students | What do you think your tutor was looking for?  
Tell me about the comments you got from your tutor.  
Written?  
What other feedback did you get?  
What did he/she mean by: [whatever feedback student reports] |
| **What is student’s own assessment of the essay?** | How did you think you did in this essay? [Add: ‘putting aside the comments’ if student simply repeats comments]  
How do you come to that assessment of your essay?  
OR  
What influences your assessment of how you did?  
What do you make of the approaches of other students? |
| **How, if at all, does student act on the basis of his/her evaluation of the essay?** | What do you think you’ve learnt from doing this essay?  
- Anything else?  
What difference will it make or has it made to the way you approach(ed) the next one? |
## Appendix 2: Interviews with Tutors

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analysis questions</th>
<th>Interview Questions for tutors</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is the <strong>context</strong> for how the tutor sees own role in developing students’ essay-writing?</td>
<td>I’d like to ask you about the intellectual journey that you see students take over the three years that they are here. How do you see that being expressed in the essays that students produce over time? Can you tell me where an essay like this one fits into the development you’re just described? What are you looking for in an essay like this one?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What strategies (for enabling students’ use of feedback) does the tutor use or believe to be necessary?</td>
<td>Can you talk me through what happens in one of your tutorials focusing – say on the tutorial with a student who wrote this essay? Prompt: As tutor talks list those aspects that are related to essay-writing and ask What is your rationale for doing x? How do you communicate your assessment of the essay? Prompt: written, discussion, students’ own assessment, grades?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the tutor’s conception of good feedback?</td>
<td>Why do you do it that way? Are there any other reasons that you do it that way?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the tutor’s assessment of students’ responses to feedback?</td>
<td>Thinking about the student who wrote this essay, how did he/she respond to your approach to feedback? Can you think of a student that represents a contrasting example? Why do you think these students respond in these ways? What do you think the students’ responsibility was, and ought to have been, in these two cases?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the tutor’s view about the roles of students and what has he/she observed?</td>
<td>What do you think students gain from each other – with respect to essay writing? What do you think makes those gains possible? And what inhibits them?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How, if at all, does the tutor act on this assessment or consider action to be necessary?</td>
<td>Do you think, given all that you have said, that there are any implications in for your role as tutor? Any implications for the role of colleges Any implications for faculty/school?</td>
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REFERENCES


