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The promise of the short text: writing risk into visual arts practice

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Abstract

The promise of the short text: writing risk into visual arts practice

In this study I aim to see if writing can enhance visual arts practice. Much UK Quality Assurance Agency and Higher Education visual arts documentation recommends risk, as do many practitioners. I hypothesise that very short, tightly-structured essays will foster risk by combining radical format, content demand and writing's esteem. I experimented with essays by Foundation visual arts students at Coventry University in 2011. Half the group was assigned a short essay as above, the other half a 1,000-word, conventional essay. Both groups had the same essay topic choices; both were taught in the same way as far as possible; both assignments were individual. Practice-based presentations took place shortly after the essays, and students were advised of potential connections between the tasks. Quantitative data was taken from all essay and presentation grades; qualitative data from essay drafts, questionnaires and interviews with selected 128-word essay students.

The grades show the 128-word essay students slightly outperforming the others. Four themes emerged from the qualitative data: provisional meaning, risk, practice parallels and project process. Drafts and questionnaires showed improvisation and keen engagement; interviews (loosely following Bryman's 'unstructured' model) considered content, form, convention, risk and transferability of writing to practice. The main problems students faced when writing the short essays were how to say enough and how to mix tradition with innovation. There was evidence that some students connected the short essay with their practice – but to connect is not necessarily to enhance. The short essays were very diverse, some radically inventive, others less so – yet the study recommends caution when rethinking traditional writing assignments because some students respect traditional writing, and may find the extreme form of the very short essay patronising unless it can promise more.

The study's contribution to knowledge is to promise more by making writing a metaphor for practice and evaluated as such, taking writing beyond mimicking or analysing practice. The study also induced a supporting theory that absolutes and variables need careful balance, extending the bisociative notion of mixing tradition with innovation. The study showed that these short essays could enhance practice by fostering risk, but also that risk is very variable. This questions how such risks are evaluated, and even whether an enforced risk is a risk at all, and not just ingenuity.

The thesis has six chapters: Introduction; Literature review; The short story in visual arts practice; The short essay in action; Student responses; Conclusion. Appendices contain three associated papers and all drafts with comments, questionnaires with responses, and full interview transcripts annotated to demonstrate emerging themes and connections to research questions. The study draws on reader-response as a theoretical framework, and is informed by the study of visual arts academic writing, risk-taking in visual arts practice, Koestler's bisociative understanding of creativity, provisional meaning and the short story.

The promise of the short text:

writing risk into visual arts practice

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the University's
requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy



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Chapter 1

Introduction

‘I want to draw. Not write’. This pithy, punning and interestingly punctuated statement might be thought a good summary of visual arts¹ students’ feelings about writing.² However, a questionnaire I handed out to Foundation Studies students at Coventry University in 2011 suggests instead that some HE (Higher Education) visual arts students might be receptive to expressive, practice-based writing. The student who made the opening quote admitted to sometimes liking writing and sometimes *not* liking writing; from this group of 68 respondents, twice as many students admitted to liking writing as disliking it (although three-quarters of the group were ambivalent, like the student, above, whose words indicate a *priority*, but not necessarily a dislike of writing). 66% of respondents also thought of writing as ‘useful’. 62.5% of final year Graphic Design undergraduates at Coventry University in a questionnaire I gave them at the same time agreed that they should be ‘encouraged to write’.

Recent initiatives have clearly aligned vocational visual arts HE courses with employment and professional practice, and thus many visual arts students may not think writing useful apart from in reports or journal articles (although they may still like it). This *may* explain the slightly more enthusiastic endorsement of writing by final year students as they contemplate life *after* university whereas Foundation students see it from the other end. The Dearing Report of 1997 (also known as the NCIHE, the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education) urged better company / institution links, funding for business ideas and entrepreneurship, and ‘innovative approaches to programme design’ (Summary Report 1997: 44-47). Dearing was also critical of what he saw as institutional élitism and an HE culture ‘unsympathetic to non-traditional groups’ (Report 5 1997: 5). This meant a severe reappraisal of courses and in some cases contextual studies writing disappearing from some HE visual arts courses in the first years of this century, although it is now (in 2013) regaining some ground in my experience; for example some Coventry University visual arts courses reintroduced dissertations around 2010, having dropped them in the preceding course reviews). The fees increase and the 2010 Browne Report have also intensified the focus on courses’ professional alignment and employability: visual arts student writing has to fight hard to survive in this climate if it is not to be seen as a legacy of an outdated and devalued tradition.

Despite the suggestion in the questionnaires that students are perhaps thinking of writing in employability terms, a transferable skill, something worth having because someone who cannot write properly may well find it harder to get a job than someone who can, I have recent evidence of visual arts students who have thoroughly enjoyed their contextual studies dissertations, rejoicing in the break from studio work and enjoying the argument

¹ In this entire study, ‘visual arts’ is taken to mean fine arts, graphics, illustration, fashion, animation, film and similar mainstream HE (Higher Education) courses, principally, but not exclusively, at BA undergraduate level. The study’s experiment cohort were from Coventry University’s Foundation Studies cohort, and the rationale for their choice is explained in Chapter 4.

² Interestingly, a year before the questionnaire in which this student made this comment, I wrote a paper with nearly the same title; this is included in this thesis for different reasons (see Appendix 5).

(although gaining writing skills was mentioned: perhaps this was preferred to, or valued more than, the argument aspect).³ And of course students – including visual arts students – *do* write, even if they do not realise it or if they associate writing with different disciplines or generations. Social media and texting have foregrounded writing, and in particular short text writing and all the tactics *that* brings to fit messages onto screens (often whilst on the move).

My interest in writing – and thus by extension student writing – comes from my educational background in literature and languages and my professional publishing experience. The intellectual appeal of literature and writing have not diminished for me, neither has my conviction, based on my experience, that visual artists need to be able to write and to respect writing if they are to flourish. A major part of my previous professional work was writing to fit: books, magazines, captions, display words which need textual as well as typographic balance, text wrapped around images, text adapted to work with images, images adapted to work with text, screen texts calling for careful rhythm to work with varying resolutions; the relationship is symbiotic, and, in my experience, a facility with words is expected more in those trained to work with images than the reverse. My most recent completed professional project was as a co-author of the *Phaidon Archive of Graphic Design* (2012). Each illustrated entry had a maximum of around 320 words: these words have to work very hard to include persuasive content, a major consideration in a £144 product. At the same time as I started on this (2008), I began projects with very short texts with students at Coventry University. In one, I asked Fashion students to imagine a Dior exhibition at the V&A and asked them to produce exactly 152⁴ words of entry text and exactly 152 words of exit text. We discussed content, imagery and provisional meaning as one tactic amongst many: one student gave me 152 adjectives, explaining that visitors could decide at any time which were relevant and which were not, and that visitors' decisions might change the next day because they might see the exhibition in a new light, or because their previously determined adjectives might prompt them to rethink their response to it. This was really the genesis of the short essay of this study: I needed a writing project that would be intellectually and formally challenging, would respond to cognitive demands and might equally be fun and playful if I was going to justify writing – especially quite experimental writing – in a visual arts HE course. I wanted a writing project that would not necessarily replace traditional contextual studies writing, but would relate to practice and would enhance it.

The short text is not easy: Pascal is supposed to have excused a long letter by saying he did not have time to write a short one; the loosely paraphrased 'if I'm to speak for 10 minutes I need a week to prepare, if you want me to talk for an hour I'm ready now' has been variously attributed to Woodrow Wilson, Mark Twain and Winston Churchill, and it may well have been he who also said that if a report was two pages long he would read it, if it was five pages long his secretary would read it and if it was more than five pages long no one would read it. The short essay might also appeal because its form is generally readily discernible; micro-fiction is very

³ This evidence is from an official Coventry University module questionnaire from 2008 for the Graphic Design dissertation module which I ran (and still run).

⁴ This is the number of words in *Vogue's* first Dior piece in 1947 – it seemed as good a number as any, a figure of random exactitude which caused comment and question, thus perhaps enhancing application (this latter was not surveyed in questionnaires or feedback, but was certainly mentioned by the students, as were other very specific word counts).

fashionable; social media writing and texting puts demands on text lengths; if students really hate writing there is not much of it; it is challenging making the content fit.

I decided that risk was the best filter for fit: rather than measure the essays by a set of familiar metrics which might then minimise the essays' relevance to practice, I felt that risk would be good because it would not need to be articulated at the outset: all I had to do was set the problem and hope that the students' natural talents, indignation at the project's restrictions, and suspicions that writing was not their domain – and thus perhaps a good opportunity to try something risky – would persuade them to step outside their familiar comfort-zones. Risk is regularly seen as an essential of visual arts practice, but risk can be subjective and unfashionable in today's ultra-safe and relatively conformist climate (2.3). The essays were followed up by presentations which were intended to see if there were any attributable links between the students' essays and their practice, an endeavour bolstered by the interviews. If writing could reintroduce a measure of risk to practice, in whatever form, then the project would be a success.

The thesis has six chapters. Chapter 1 is this introduction; Chapter 2 is the literature review, in which research into visual arts academic writing, risk-taking, Koestler's seminal ideas of creativity, provisional meaning and the short story as a model for the short essay are examined. There are many sources used: I have not chosen a single or dominant theorist, commentator or school of thought – apart from reader-response as a codification of provisional meaning – because the whole area is rich and diverse. I have instead taken thoughts and viewpoints from a wide range of contemporary and historical viewpoints in order to give an overview of the thinking in each of these areas, to see how and why they might connect, and to provide a convincing base for generating the research questions (RQs).

Chapter 3 considers examples of visual arts practice filtered through the ontology of the short story: this is not to say that all visual arts should so be analysed, but that in this study the short story is the central and most important creative endeavour examined – the study would lack intellectual credibility if I could not demonstrate how short story writing could be reconfigured as examples of visual arts practice. The examples in this chapter are also revisited in the Conclusion (Chapter 6) to demonstrate how writing – in the form of the short essay – might be a metaphor for visual arts practice.

Chapter 4 contains the methods, findings and discussions of the experiment with the short essays. The methodology – in particular the rationales for describing the project as an experiment and behind grades moderation – is explained and justified. The chapter is extensively illustrated with project documentation and has a detailed analysis of 12 of the 35 short essays submitted.

Chapter 5 explains the data gathering and interview strategies, and analyses student responses of the project in the form of draft essays, questionnaires and interviews. These are very extensive and the transcripts of these as well as of the draft essay exchanges and the questionnaires are analysed in detail in the appendices, but are summarised in this chapter. Both Chapters 4 and 5 analyse student work and responses in the light of emerging themes, literature review themes and the research questions.

Chapter 6 is the study's conclusion, in which the shortcomings of the methodology, the results of the experiment, the contribution to knowledge of the study, the claim that the short essay can be a metaphor for practice, and future potential applications of the research are also explained. This is followed by the bibliography and seven appendices. Four contain project-related material (drafts, questionnaires, interviews, and a complete set of 128-word essays) and three contain relevant papers I have published since embarking on this study: 'I came here to draw, not to write', delivered in 2010 and concerning student-autonomous delimitation of essays and new essay formats; a paper delivered to the 2010 Coventry Symposium on the short essay as an anti-institutional gesture; and 'Blah Blah Blahnik', a paper delivered in November 2012 which concerns student practice-based writing and the impact of literary theories on practical studio work.

Chapter 2

Literature review

2.1 Introduction

This literature review is in four parts: visual arts academic writing, risk-taking in visual arts practice, provisional meaning; the short story. The study asks if writing can enhance visual arts practice: this means that visual arts academic writing and risk-taking need to be examined as the *subjects* of potential change by this study's experiment, whilst provisional meaning and the short story are examined as the *agents* of potential change. The sequence of the parts reflects these two aspects of study.

Writing is largely seen as a cognitive and transferable skill in HE visual arts courses, and risk is extensively written into course documentation (although in a variety of different terms) as a *sine qua non* of creative practice. The study does not seek to explore differences between essays, reports, creative practice portfolios or dissertations, partly because the differences are irrelevant to this study and partly because the terms are often used interchangeably. Visual arts writing projects vary from institution to institution and course to course, and what matters is *why* visual arts students are asked to write at all: accordingly, the rationales behind any insistence upon writing are studied, as are initiatives from course planners, visual arts commentators and pedagogues to connect writing with practice.

Risk-taking appears richly valued but poorly understood: it is written into course documentation with a sense of weary inevitability and is often the cause of miscommunication between staff and students. Particular analysis of the psychology of risk is outside the province of this study, but in my experience it is reasonably safe to assert that risk is personal in that it is experienced and executed differently by different people. Prominent practitioners' views on risk are evaluated, as are examples of visual arts practice which have used risk with greater and lesser degrees of success. Risk-inhibitors such as practice guidelines and socially-imposed lack of responsibility are explored. The fundamental paradox of risk is evident in any intelligent study of its phenomena: risk is negated by being managed, understood or tamed.

Risk's personal dimension and slippery nature necessitates a study of provisional meaning. This begins with an overview of the main tenets of reader-response, a classic literary theory convincingly argued to have extended into all spheres of creative endeavour. A crucial aspect of my study, given the limitations of space in the short essay, is vague language because this may be a source of useful short cuts both physically (it saves space) and temporally (readers may get the point more quickly). However, if this meaning is so efficiently communicated, it may mean that the necessary injection of reader-response provisionality has been negated: vague language may not be so vague

after all (or its vagueness may be illusory or disingenuous). This conundrum is studied, alongside other compressions and ellipses of language that save space and time – but may thus make meaning too immobile to be adequately risky. Indeed, provisional meaning as a manifestation of risk is analysed here as well. Provisional meaning as it might be applied to visual arts practice is explored in a few representative examples to demonstrate that the link with risk in this respect is not fanciful.

The short story is posited as the ideal model for the short essay, bringing together all the above themes and requirements. The short story is understood to be short, but opinions and definitions of shortness are vague and unhelpfully comparative at times; however, this offers interesting opportunities for autonomous delimitation, opportunities amplified by a resurgent interest in the short story via flash and micro-fiction and by an eclectic and enthusiastic use of a variety of media by writers in these modes. Accordingly, the short story's delimitation is studied, as is its accent on the formal, using two ways in which this is evident: short story openers and short story repeats. The short story is seen by some literary critics to deploy suggestion: this makes it an ideal accomplice for provisional meaning; it is also seen by some literary critics to be subversive: this makes it an ideal vehicle for risk, and thus by extension for creative practice as risk appears woven into the rubric of such practice. These characteristics of the short story are analysed and where appropriate set against the novel: the short story will not be able to claim suggestion and subversion exclusively. Paradoxically – and ideally – this makes it an ideal model for the short essay experiment and as a hypothetical carrier of risk: were it able to claim these characteristics exclusively, the provisionality and the risk would be diminished. This paradox – that the more provisional meaning and risk are managed, the less effective and interesting they are – is central to this entire study.

2.2 Visual arts academic writing

2.2.1 Introduction

Academic writing in this study means writing that visual arts students do in HE. This part of the literature review aims to establish in general terms why visual arts students' academic writing was incorporated into HE programmes, and to evaluate where some visual arts writing initiatives might lead. It will not differentiate between essays, long essays, extended essays, dissertations or any other terminology for writing which are routinely used in HE and which in my experience often mean the same thing to students. This study is concerned with writing to enhance practice, and experiments with a very tight, short essay as a complement to existing visual arts student writing (which it does not seek to displace).

2.2.2 Why visual arts students write

The 1960s Coldstream Reports supposedly brought visual arts HE education 'into line' by introducing traditional writing, thus questioning the 'credibility of practice-based education' (Bhagat, O'Neill 2011: 179). After the discrete dissertation module was removed in 2006 from Coventry University's undergraduate Graphic Design course in a bid to increase its practical content, students requested that it be reinstated in the 2010 course review, thus arguably endorsing Coldstream. Barrass believes that 'only by writing well can you give a good account of yourself as a student' (1995: 2). His table (Figure 2.1) may be thought by some to be contentious and inaccurate for those visual arts students who measure their worth exclusively by their actual practice portfolios alone, but it may accurately reflect the views of those *outside* (and perhaps also *inside*) the discipline who feel that the discipline needs approval, credibility and status.⁵

There is no specific mention of writing in the HE Quality Assurance Agency's BA (Hons) descriptor, although it specifies 'systematic understanding of key [discipline] aspects' and the ability to 'evaluate evidence, arguments and assumptions' (2008: 18, 19), both of which could be well tested in a dissertation. The QAA's Subject Benchmark Statement, recognising 'alternative synergies and modes of practice', leaves curriculum content and delivery to institutions. The 'Defining Principles' do not mention writing, although 'appropriate critical discourse and

⁵ The only time I received spontaneous applause from candidates, parents and others in the audience when performing Front of House duties introducing courses on recruitment Open Days in Coventry University's School of Art and Design was when I emphasised the rigour of the Graphic Design dissertation around 2007.

contextual framework’ are commended (2008: v, 2, 6). If institutions offer visual arts writing assignments, one might conjecture that they believe that such assignments contribute to the development of such attributes and skills.⁶

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Figure 2.1. ‘Judged by your writing’ (Barrass 1995: 2).

Coventry University’s final year undergraduate Graphic Design dissertation is mapped in the Programme Specification against, *inter alia*, knowledge of the ‘parameters’ of practice, ‘specific and appropriate critical and cultural discourse’; acquisition of relevant ‘generic and specialist knowledge’ of concepts, theories and terminologies; application of research methods; application of ‘sound critical judgement’ and thoughtful response to criticism; communication of ideas in a ‘wide range of media’; independent and confident working; demonstrating flexibility. The only mention of writing concerns the importance of planning for it (2010: 8, 9, 10). The same dissertation’s learning outcomes expect students to ‘synthesize disparate research material’; to ‘articulate and justify a design-related stance’; to work systematically, observing scholarly conventions (346 DVA 2010: 3).⁷ All this could equally be done by a poster presentation, for example.⁸

Borg claims, controversially, that visual arts education ‘does not necessarily need writing’ (2007: 85). Borg joins the debate about the value of the ‘agonistic academic essay’, and its deeply-held position in ‘scholastic disputation’ (2007: 85). He praises Writing-PAD for its work in both raising standards of the teaching of writing and in aligning writing with visual arts practice (2007: 85). Seeing the Bauhaus’s ‘analytic approach’ as the antithesis of an art education ‘based on mimesis’ (2007: 90), Borg thus values an individual, exploratory approach to visual arts practice. He quotes Thistlewood (1992), who sees the period from roughly 1950 onwards as seminal in a shift away from a ‘system devoted to conformity [and] to a misconceived sense of belonging to a classical tradition’ and towards the ‘principle of individual creative development’ (2007: 93). Borg also cites Rosenberg’s belief that

⁶ It is beyond the scope of this study to discuss exhaustively which UK HE institutions offering visual arts courses incorporate writing. However, initial investigation showed that Coventry University, Arts University College Bournemouth, Birmingham City University, Cardiff Metropolitan University, Northbrook College, University of Chester, University of Derby, and University of Reading all offered some kind of writing project/s, named variously as dissertations, essays or extended essays. These were chosen because they are comparable institutions to mine, Coventry University.

⁷ These are very similar to final year dissertation learning outcomes for students of similar disciplines in other institutions with which I am particularly familiar: Cardiff Metropolitan University, Northbrook College, and University of Reading.

⁸ Indeed, in the 2012-13 iteration of this module, I have incorporated a poster stage in order to emphasise content at the expense of any unduly superficial and potentially misleading student concerns with the mechanics of the writing process – the overall standard of the dissertations’ *arguments* is noticeably higher than it was in 2011-12.

valuing theory could distort evaluation of practice (2007: 96). Clearly a balance must be struck between theory and unfettered exploration. Borg implies writing can do this – provided it reflects the ‘purposes’ of practice and not the interests of society and institutions (2007: 99). However, these ‘purposes’ are not easily defined (and nor should they be if creative integrity and innovation are valued).

Writing and the Renaissance introduction of theory to practice were crucial to elevating and justifying artists’ status (Pevsner, cited in Borg 2007: 86), yet Brian Eno and Roger Wilson⁹ in 2005 criticised requirements that visual arts students should conform to basic standards of ‘general education’ (2007: 98). However, Eno and Wilson have secure intellectual and financial status, and can afford to be dismissive of basic standards which might appeal to struggling visual arts students. Evidence at Coventry University suggests that although a significant number of Graphic Design undergraduates dislike writing, they think that it is important and that, by inference, it might help them in the jobs market.¹⁰ Traditional writing as they experienced it to date was implied, and for many visual arts students (in mine and many of my colleagues’s experience) this kind of writing might still be seen as a way of helping to calibrate credibility in an uncertain world. 44% of the students responding to the questionnaire discussed in footnote 10 agreed that writing would help them in the ‘jobs market’. Interestingly, only 41% felt that their design portfolio gave them self-respect as an undergraduate, whereas 88% considered writing a communication tool and thus part of graphic design (see also footnote 14). However, of that 41% who felt that their portfolio gave them self-respect, three times as many students felt that they *should* be encouraged to write as did not, a perhaps surprising figure. These responses should be read with the caution appropriate to any single questionnaire because cohorts and contexts vary – but the results are interesting, nonetheless because they show (as does footnote 10) that perceptions of writing’s usefulness are complex and layered.

2.2.3 Current provision of visual arts writing in UK HE

Visual arts UK HE writing is usually either in the form of essays,¹¹ reflective practice logbooks, or project reports.¹² The essays tend to have specified word lengths,¹³ with a format generally understood by visual arts students because

⁹ Wilson was then Head of Chelsea College of Art and Design, Eno a musician and prominent figure in the arts: both might be considered disconnected from the realities of student expectations and the difficulties facing students because of the ongoing (in 2013) current economic and employment climate.

¹⁰ 62.5% (20 of 32 respondents of a cohort of 58) of 2011-12 final year Coventry University Graphic Design undergraduates who completed a questionnaire I gave them in November 2011 agreed that ‘Graphic Design students should be encouraged to write’. Four out of those 20 respondents admitted that they found writing ‘deadly boring’ – out of the whole group of 32 respondents, 11 (34%) ‘hated writing’ and / or found it ‘deadly boring’ This suggests that even amongst those who disliked writing there were some who conceded its value: attitudes to writing in relation to practice are perhaps not as straightforward as many might like to think, and measures to change writing for visual arts students to enhance its relevance need to be very carefully considered.

¹¹ Final year assignments are generally called long essays or dissertations, the main differences between these and essays in other years being that students usually choose the topic and research objectives of their long essays and dissertations, whereas essays tend to be given out in years one and two with fixed topics. Long essays and dissertations tend to be longer than these essays, although module reorganisation has led to some dissertations being noticeably short in some institutions – for example, in Coventry University’s School of Art and Design the Graphic Design

they have come across essays at school or college. Reflective practice logbooks usually call for reflective commentary with specified word lengths but fewer constraints and looser, more subjective writing than all forms of the essay. Reports vary, but in visual arts tend to contextualise practice significance and the important stages in its development. But Russell sees value in traditional rigour and writing, especially as he sees HE in a ‘rule-based culture of the law and “quality assurance”’ (2011: 203). Russell may be thinking of HE’s perception by stakeholders such as students, parents, sponsoring organisations, politicians and the media. He presumably believes that HE should retain intellectual credibility by avoiding changes which might be thought to dilute quality. Haggis is not convinced that traditional HE mores will necessarily help students to succeed thereafter (2003: 100), but in the light of the 2010 Browne Review and HE fees deregulation, many students might agree with Russell.

Elite HE assumptions are claimed to be unhelpfully forcing students to conform. These assumptions are that students’ aims ‘are, or can be made to be, the same as the aims of academics’, that students are able to ‘make sense’ of institutional aims, and that students arrive at university already at levels expected of them by academics (all Haggis 2003: 97). Haggis believes that these assumptions create possible disconnects between existing standards and student learning. She argues that these standards have taken academics ‘many years to learn’ (2003: 98), thus making the disconnection harder to repair. Citing Richardson (2000), she claims that unsuccessful students’ writing is incoherent (2003: 99), implying that some students are badly served by HE. However, incoherent writing alone may not stop them becoming creative, innovative and satisfied visual arts practitioners.

Melles believes in design-relevant frameworks for writing (2008: 261), echoing Haggis’s concerns when he identifies an élite who ensure that ‘access to literacies is brokered by institutions and individuals in mediating roles’ (2008: 262). Melles recognises that vocational and practice-based courses (such as visual arts) are under pressure to ‘conform to dominant writing conventions’, but are also working to create their own intellectual rubric as part of their ‘disciplinary legitimisation’. This could be seen as an early twenty-first century endorsement – via intelligent reinterpretation – of 1960s Coldstream Reports. He questions the relevance and efficacy of policies that nourish ‘inherited and privileged writing practices’ (all 2008: 262). However, not all visual arts students feel impeded or alienated by traditional writing.¹⁴ It could be argued that if they were to succeed at traditional writing they would be more satisfied than if they had succeeded at a tailor-made task, which might seem condescending and downgrading.

dissertation is 4,500 words. This was considered short enough to be commented upon by the external examiner in 2012, but in fact conforms to University word count tariffs. It is not the province of this study to define and differentiate between essays, long essays dissertations, reflective practice logbooks and project reports.

¹² I have experimented with different formats, and have published the results – see Appendix 5. I have not come across similar experiments elsewhere.

¹³ Coventry University School of Art and Design has a word count tariff system.

¹⁴ When given a core option choice between a conventional dissertation and the freer reflective practice logbook in 2007-08, 106 of a mixed cohort of Graphic Design and Illustration undergraduates at Coventry University chose the dissertation, whereas four chose the reflective practice logbook. I sought reasons for choices, and these were generally because of familiarity with what they perceived as a conventional essay format and / or because of a conviction that the dissertation was a genuinely demanding academic exercise. Convincing these students of the benefits of a more free-form writing exercise such as the reflective practice logbook was difficult, leading me to wonder if these students were also dubious of

Wood, by contrast, insists that existing writing norms are obsolete in the visual arts. He champions ‘critical and strategic thinking’, the ‘educational importance of writing’ and criticises the ‘serious limitations’ of scholastic mindsets that inform writing practices (both 2011: 181). He believes that the ‘thesis > antithesis > synthesis model’ – Mitchell and Evison’s ‘idealised’ pinnacle (2006: 68) – is too deep-rooted and that an ‘entrepreneurial [and] socially responsible new design culture’ is emerging and changing too fast for the ‘cardinal metaphor [of] rigour’ to be helpful or relevant. He dismisses any insistence on dialectic coherence as ‘monolithic’ because it creates a ‘discrepancy between the academic library [and] the design studio’ (2011: 183, 185, 188). Wood finds traditional ‘linear, finite questions’ incompatible with the contemporary design process (2011: 189), and endorses de Bono’s uncompromising view that ‘academic writing [is a] triumph of form over content’ (2011: 190). Nevertheless, Wood might be accused of replacing one monolithic culture with another. Russell accuses Wood of crudely seeing academe as an ‘enabling programme at best, and a usurping mode of knowing at worst’ (2011: 202). Bhagat and O’Neill share Wood’s eagerness to match writing with practice, also celebrating ‘rigorous academic writing [which will prepare students] for entry into the creative industries’ (2011: 177). Bhagat and O’Neill are bestowing the creative industries with an identity – in a well-intentioned way – but the creative industries can be capricious, however, and, as we have seen above, many students respect writing’s traditions and status, so this identity may be specious.

2.2.4 Possible new directions

Some visual arts students clearly find writing unpleasant, difficult or irrelevant.¹⁵ There is help available in institutional publications, module guides, books, websites and apps. Coventry University cross-disciplinary handouts list characteristics of good assignments, the writing process and effective paragraph structure (Ganobcsik-Williams, Coventry University 2005, 2007). Coventry University’s Graphic Design dissertation support sets out the required sequence of main parts with suggested word lengths, emphasising academic standards and scholarly engagement (346 DVA 2011: 3).¹⁶ The *Essay Writing Guide* app is divided into sections offering help with sentences, syntax and punctuation. These guides are well-intentioned, offering useful, if routine, advice which might be accused of emphasising conventional writing skills at the expense of experimentation.

However, virtually all students need some help of some kind in understanding the terms of a written – or indeed of *any* – assignment. Hagemann’s concern is with how students ‘interpret’ their writing assignments, believing that tutors should help students to learn to ‘read them critically’. Hagemann is artless in places, for example her

their writing abilities and were therefore reluctant to try out something new – that there was sanctuary as well as respectability in the traditional dissertation.

¹⁵ See footnote 10.

¹⁶ Cardiff Metropolitan University and Northbrook College, where I am external examiner, offer similar support.

‘heuristic for understanding writing assignments’ (both 2002: 5) is really a checklist of questions for students to ask, and evokes basic advice reminiscent of *The Times*’s acronym ‘DOPE [...] Define the question, Outline the options, Produce an argument, End succinctly’ (2007: 9). Hagemann ranges from levels of formality to simply recommending that students ask ‘how long should the text be?’ (2002: 6). Mixing practicalities with intellectually demanding notions might ease such demands by making them seem manageable, but it might equally make practicalities seem unnecessarily demanding or it might over-simplify, by association, the difficult questions that students need to ask when writing.

Gillett and Hammond recommend ‘subject-specific material [...] to accommodate the problems of lifelong learning’ (2009: 120), echoing Haggis’s concerns about the specificity and intransigence of traditional HE methods. They are also critical of study skills manuals which do not deal with the ‘purpose and function of the wide range of academic activities demanded of students’ (2009: 122), suggesting that concentrating attention on surface features will not overhaul writing assignments intelligently or sensitively. Haggis believes that to foster deep learning needs a measure of how students understand, as opposed to how they ‘reproduce knowledge’ (2003: 92). Cowan, citing Carl Rogers, aligns deep learning with ‘significant’ learning, which he sees as ‘functional’ (1998: 142). If this creates discipline expertise, this may help students make sense of the many ways in which meaning is interpreted (Haggis 2003: 94). She recommends new ways of judging success or failure (2003: 100). Hand might agree, pointing out the ‘particular mediation that writing performs with conventional expectations’ (2007: 49). Although Hand advocates ‘art writing that is not limited by tight academic conventions’, she nevertheless sees art writing as belonging to ‘different conventional approaches’ (2007: 47). However, this move should be truly radical in that it should be thoughtful and not crudely reactive, and should not make ill-considered changes for the sake of change which might sabotage any efforts to find refuge in traditional writing. Ultimately, students’ learning is the priority and it should not be compromised by educators’ ideas of how best to enhance that learning if the results of new initiatives are worse than before. The crucial question behind this discussion is whether this learning and any improvement is measured in students’ writing or in their practice (or both).

The inference from Haggis is that writing assignments should be fit for purpose, and that pre-existing formats may result in students’ knowledge being measured in terms of assignments’ characteristics instead of discipline characteristics – a detrimental self-referentiality. Mitchell and Evison echo this when they implicitly criticise the ‘peculiarly “schooled”’ nature of the essay. They see it as so deeply embedded in education that, (paraphrasing Womack, 1993), it has become damagingly self-referential (2006: 80). Their point is inadvertently reinforced by Tappenden, who considers the ‘intersections and boundaries’ between writing and visual arts practice (2010: 257). Despite the innovative nature of his enterprise, Tappenden summarises the emergent writing in conventional terms of ‘academic structure and critical content’ (2010: 278).

Bhagat and O’Neill commend Writing-PAD’s ‘embracing of writing for learning by many design practitioners and teachers’ (2011: 180), but imply criticism of its tendency to seek alternatives to the ‘rigour of so-called, traditional

academic essay writing in order to appeal to the perceived strengths of design students' (2011: 180). Writing-PAD's position is problematic because it could be thought patronising by students who value being judged by what they perceive as robust and cognitively rigorous extra-curricular metrics such as traditional writing (see 2.2.3, above), and because students' strengths change. Their benchmarks of 'strengths' could thus either be arbitrarily set or constantly changing. Bhagat and O'Neill's own project, *writingdesign*, seeks to 'embed writing in the [design] discipline', although its principal concern is to help students 'write critically, confidently, and effectively about design in its complex and varied contexts [hoping] that this will in turn reinforce thoughtful and innovative design practice' (2011: 194). This differs little from the dissertation mapping and learning outcomes outlined in 2.2.2, above: the connection between thinking and practice is still only implicit.

2.2.5 Tonfoni – visual writing case study

Tonfoni aims to create new writing via a 'visual, multidimensional experience', feeling that writing is physical, 'akin to creating a drawing or painting and designing a structure' (2000:18). This potentially appealing method (for visual arts students and practitioners) should be steadied by points made about the perceived status of writing, above. Tonfoni's 'Three-Floor Rotation Machine for Poetry' (Figure 2.2) carries 'poetic text' which is intended to be evocative. She claims that it allows varied text access in order to trigger 'emotions and personal feelings' (2000: 154). Tonfoni does not discuss the relationship between text, shapes and structure: she appears to sanction any configuration of these provided the text breaks out of the linear. *The Writer's Wheel* app has a loosely similar 'three-tiered spinner' (Haas 2012), although two-dimensional and screen-based (Figure 2.3). Unlike Tonfoni, who appears to want to extend textual meaning, *The Writer's Wheel* spinner 'demystifies [...] although whimsical [...] and fun'. It is a 'tool to help people understand' (2012). This pragmatic approach might appeal to visual arts practitioners who might see Tonfoni's device as an artwork whose adaptable textual meta-applications are more relevant to their practice and less relevant to their writing (unless a plausible case to connect the two can be made, see discussion about Koestler – 2.3.3).

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Figure 2.2. (Left) 'Three-floor rotation machine for poetry' (Tonfoni 2000: 155).

Figure 2.3. (Right) Part of 'three-tiered spinner' (Haas 2012).

Tonfoni thinks creativity helps to fulfil the ‘purpose of writing’ (2000: 29). However, her approach is monological, largely discounting a breadth of response which may be fuelled by personal, cultural or other contexts. It also largely discounts interpretive *potential*: this can be engaging, productive and more inclusive than unambiguous messages in some visual arts practice, such as advertising or awareness campaigns with large and diverse markets where targeting one group might specifically exclude another. Unambiguous meaning might become tiresome in some work, where playful engagement with receivers keeps it alive longer. Interpretive potential may also concern *pace* and *style* – and not just *degree* – of receiving meaning, leading different people to broadly the same meaning but in different ways and at different times: questions of provisional meaning are adumbrated here, and Tonfoni’s approach to writing could thus be criticised as inhibiting.

Tonfoni makes contentious assumptions about shape association, proposing textual annotations with symbols to give the ‘intonation [which is] missing in written text’. For example, she uses a spiral to represent ‘description’, because she feels that the spiral conveys description’s ‘free, unconstrained characteristics’ (2000: 75, 77). However, her spiral (Figure 2.4) is carefully regular, tightly coiled, static and not ‘unconstrained’. Text without symbols might be safer because it might be read as neutral: one could argue that even neutral responses produce debate and negotiated meaning, and are thus free and unconstrained – which is what Tonfoni wants, but not by this method.

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Figure 2.4. Descriptive text spiral (Tonfoni 2000: 86).

Tonfoni organises text into shapes because the shapes have ‘specific communicative intention’. She claims that the shapes are ‘agreed upon by both writer and reader’ (2000: 91), although she does not elaborate on this. She ascribes square-shaped text to a story, for example, but these shape choices are arbitrary and apparently unsupported by psychological or consensual evidence (Figure 2.5). Forcing text into boxes is not new, and the whole exercise might seem trivial to visual arts students seeking a more meaningful challenge. Examples of shaping text and applying patterns which work with existing frames and spaces exist in mediaeval books (Figure 2.6), and in a Coventry University Graphic Design undergraduate spontaneously doodling onto a course handbook in 2011 (Figure 2.7). These both handle text and space more adroitly than Tonfoni’s example, whose awkward spacing could be caused by gauche or intractable handling of space, grammar, syntax or synonyms: a perfectly spaced shape might make these drawbacks seem intentional and suspend negative criticism (see 2.5).

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Fi : 102).

Fi *d Works of St. Augustine* (Amerbach 1506: page no. unavailable).

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Figure 2.7. Distracted student doodle (Anon. Coventry University 2011).

Tonfoni overlooks her shapes' potential to interrelate; thus memory is a triangle and in Figure 2.5 is combined with a square to make a story about memory. However, a triangle can be irregular, but a square cannot: an active reader might therefore be tempted to read 'memory' as potentially less reliable than 'story', (an interesting and fecund

possibility from such a small and minimal piece – see, for example, 4.3.4, below), even if this were neither true nor intended. Despite aiming to clarify meaning and restrict interpretative options, the opposite might result, with readers perhaps resenting what might be seen as a patronising and simplistic intrusion (although Tonfoni might claim she had at least provoked debate).

It is thus tempting to argue that Tonfoni oversimplifies and muffles meaning. However, in Minsky's Foreword (a dialogue between a sceptical critic and the author, representing Tonfoni), some interesting issues and contradictions are explored (but not really resolved). The author occasionally makes simplistic observations about ensuring correct meaning. For example, when discussing a text whose meaning does not fit into one sentence, and thus has to be split into three, the author feels that a reader might need to be told how to 'interconnect' the meanings (2000: 11), implying a disconnection between the sentences. However, preventing disconnection – or working intelligently and imaginatively with its fallout – would probably be better and more demanding than curing it. The critic articulates the (perhaps familiar) stance that 'imposing definite images constrains the viewer's imagination' and that one should leave room to exploit it; the author replies that when explaining complex material, more control may be needed. Minsky appears to contradict this by going on to say that it is 'almost always wrong to seek the "real meaning" of anything. A thing with only one meaning has scarcely any meaning at all', yet he recommends that readers should 'turn ideas around' until finding one that 'works'. He declares that this is what he means by 'thinking' (all 2000: 14, 15), thus acknowledging an intelligent and active – if persistent – reader.

2.3 Risk-taking in visual arts practice

2.3.1 Introduction

Risk in visual arts may seem essential – attempt the brave and the unknown – and fairly easy to define – do something different, whose outcome is unpredictable and might go wrong with unforeseen and / or unwanted consequences. Risk might therefore involve no more than trying a new technique to see what happens. If this straightforward formula were the case, why do so few students take risks? The evidence from students on a Foundation course in a UK HEI in 2011 suggests that although these visual arts students value risk, only a small percentage consider themselves to be outright risk-takers, and an even smaller percentage is considered to be so by their tutors. The answer to the question, above, might be that students do not really value risk in the same way that course planners, staff and established practitioners do because they (students) are unsure what risk really is, and are cautious of it because the current economic and employment climate is often touted as risk-averse and compliance-tolerant.¹⁷

Students may not want to appear foolish in front of large peer groups, even though van Boxsel criticises mediocre bourgeois stupidity and condones jokers who use stupidity to highlight that of others (both 2004: 16). However, it takes a brave and mature student to use such tactics at a time of competitive grades; it takes a clever student as well to realise that the professional joker's tomfoolery is not risky: it goes with the territory. This encapsulates risk's paradox: once sanctioned, understood, encouraged and facilitated it becomes safe.

2.3.2 Why is risk-taking valued in visual arts practice?

Designer Jonathan Barnbrook unequivocally states that creative practitioners should 'experiment' (1998: 24). This is supported by, amongst others, Costa and Kellick (cited in Zimmerman 2009: 389); Robinson, who lists risk among his core creative phases (2001: 11); and Roberts and Wright, who claim that 'most [graphic] designers' agree that risk, 'exploration' and 'experimentation' are 'essential' to the creative process because otherwise they might

¹⁷ Analysis of 68 of 81 Foundation students project feedback and self-evaluation forms at Coventry University in November 2011 showed that only 10% (7 respondents) classified themselves as 5/5 ('good') risk-takers, whereas the majority (47%, 32 respondents) classified themselves as 4/5 risk-takers. This might be seen as a slightly safer option, because it might be seen as less bullishly demonstrative, less likely to be questioned and / or tested, and more measured. 34% (23 respondents) gave themselves 3/5 as risk-takers, 9% (6 respondents) gave themselves 2/5 and none went below that. These figures show an interesting – if slightly dispiriting – middle-of-the-road mentality: even to classify themselves as resolutely 0/5 risk-takers might have been more risky as it would have gone against an apparently pervasive staff stance. The pattern of tutor response to these self-classifications is inconsistent: in their comments, tutors explicitly urged 1 of the 5/5 group to take more risks (14% of that group's 7 respondents), they urged 6 of the 4/5 group (19%), 5 of the 3/5 group (22%), but only 1 of the 2/5 group (17%). This underscores my questioning of whether students value or perceive risk in the same way as tutors, whether they understand what it is or might be, and whether they feel it is appropriate and / or productive in their context...or even fun.

‘disappoint their clients [and] bore themselves’ (2010: 220, 222). These few examples are reasonably typical of the creative sector’s extensive recommendations of risk-taking. In a related but different domain, Cropley cites authors who consider risk-taking so important that they consider it one of the ‘critical attributes of the highly creative individual’ (1970: 123).

Visual arts HE education implements a well-informed framework intended to maximize the quality of student output, valuing cognitive skills as learning outcomes across the sector: for example, Coventry University identifies five cognitive skills in its generic Programme Specification for BA (Hons) Creative Arts and Design¹⁸ (2010: 9); Cardiff Metropolitan University identifies six in its BA (Hons) Graphic Communication Programme Specification (2008: 15); and QAA documentation lists four key ‘critical engagement’ attributes (2008: 8). Yet James cites a description of the creative process as ‘uniquely personal and non-cognitive’ (Dudek and Côté 1994, 1999-2000: 116), and one of Costa and Kellick’s ‘16 Habits of the Mind’ is thinking ‘flexibly [and] meta-cognitively’ (cited in Zimmerman 2009: 389): these suggest that to function creatively students and practitioners should risk subverting or abandoning some core discipline tenets. This may seem paradoxical but makes perfect sense: risk must involve questioning tenets, although one might question why tenets are written in the first place (unless the answer is to provide something to risk subverting).

Although we see that risk-taking is recommended and valued in UK HE visual arts education, the terminology tends to be vague and obvious. Whilst this study neither sets out to define creativity definitively nor to criticise institutional and practice terminology, the terminology is nevertheless a useful indicator of how risk is framed and understood. The QAA descriptor for a BA (Hons) degree includes a requirement that students demonstrate an ‘appreciation of the uncertainty, ambiguity and limits of knowledge’ (2008: 19). This could be seen as an opportunity to recognize boundaries and then to observe them *or* break them: it is unclear which. The QAA also lists ‘personal innovation’ and ‘risk-taking’ in the same sentence in its benchmark statement (2008: 9), two activities it might be challenging to differentiate meaningfully.

Institutional terminology is no more precise: Cardiff Metropolitan University recommends that students question ‘received wisdom in the light of their own experience’ (which gives the exercise the safety net of a fixed horizon, and is an empiricist statement of the obvious), and ‘flexible and innovative thinking’, which, as we have seen above, are typical, and verging on the bland. The sixth of the nine Generic Programme aims in Coventry University’s Creative Arts Programme Specification is to ‘support experimentation, speculation, exploration, enquiry, investigation and analysis within a variety of traditional and new media processes’ (2010: 6). ‘Experimentation’, ‘speculation’ and ‘exploration’ imply a departure into unknown territory; ‘enquiry’ and ‘investigation’ imply a questioning of accepted norms and values; ‘analysis’ implies defending this questioning. ‘Speculation’ and ‘exploration’ only have a nuanced distinction in practice; ‘enquiry’ and ‘investigation’ are virtually synonymous.

¹⁸ This Programme Specification covers BA (Hons) courses in Graphic Design, Illustration & Graphics, Illustration & Animation, Fine Art, and Fine Art & Illustration.

Rather than suggest a stimulating opening up of possibilities, this kind of writing suggests instead a course team unsure of their courses' true aims and content, and anxious to cover all possible angles.

The words may seem long-winded and quasi-legalistic, but are typical of the sector. The Foundation course at Coventry University urges students to keep an open mind and to explore 'new ideas through risk-taking' in the fourth of its seven course aims (2011-2012: 4). Students may find this wordy, inspirational, normal (i.e. to be expected), confusing, patronizing or annoying – or any combination of the above – not least because it is written into documentation by those whose experience is different to students'. If a fundamental creative mindset is pompous or out of touch, there will surely be a mismatch between expectation and outcome. In addition, these examples neither provide any idea of how risk might be understood or executed, nor what its benefits might be – *why* is risk celebrated?

There are equally questionable phrases in other areas. Referencing Borst, Dubois and Lubart (2006), Kirsch and Houssemand's psychologically-inclined study identifies six personality factors 'repeatedly revealed to be theoretically and empirically related to creativity: perseverance, tolerance of ambiguity, risk taking, individualism, openness to new experiences and psychoticism' (2012: 5786). This lacks specificity, and its ambiguity is opaque. 'Perseverance' might become unintelligent and stubborn stasis; 'tolerance of ambiguity' might mask inability to differentiate; 'risk taking' is relative and open to interpretation; 'individualism' if unchecked could lead to uncollegiate creative torpor; 'openness to new experiences' is bland and applicable to almost every sphere of intellectual activity from science to gardening; 'psychoticism' is another cliché (the mad genius type of creator), by no means essential to creativity and no more true than its reverse. Cropley, looking at risk from a psychologist's angle, feels that convergent thinkers are logical and organised, whereas wide categorizers will be prepared to take risks (1970: 123), and whilst this might have some psychological backing, from a creative, innovative and non-conforming angle the question has to be asked: why can convergent thinkers not be creative risk-takers, and if they were, would not the risk be more significant for having come from such an unlikely source?

The unfettered use of bland and increasingly clichéd phrases such as 'originality and passion' (Anon.: 1993: 5) when describing creativity risks devaluing the activity: students and practitioners might find the phrases obvious and patronizing, although the uncritical may find them inspirational. It would be more realistic to accept that definitions of creativity are 'doomed to failure' (Dacey and Madaus 1969: 55), and that there is nothing 'logical, routine or mechanical' (Flanagan, cited in Dacey and Madaus 1969: 56) in an 'unpredictable' creative process (James cited in Zimmerman 2009: 389). Risk might be more productively seen here as navigating the uncertainty implicit in creativity's complexity (Zimmerman 2009: 386), which at least suggests a rewarding richness in practice, offering possibilities which should *not* be enumerated if openness is to be maintained. Solving problems in 'one's own way' (Wakefield (1992) cited in James 1999-2000: 110) might mean choosing one's own materials and techniques against advice (although there is sanctuary in the familiar). It might equally mean subverting learning outcome criteria,

abandoning them altogether or obstinately refusing to take proffered risks. Risk may end up being no more than being perverse or doing what is counter-intuitive, until these in themselves become norms – and safe.

A paradox of visual arts risk is that it must be a good thing – but then where is the risk? If risks succeed, practitioners must move on and take greater risks – at stake is failure, welcomed by Roberts and Wright as possibly leading to productive surprise (2010: 221), a view supported by Zimmerman, who argues that a willingness to fail helps one to ‘function creatively’ (citing Salen and Zimmerman (2004) 2009: 395). However, failure – in whatever terms it is couched – is generally an unattractive option in a competitive climate of graded work and scarce employment: as an intellectual exercise it may be useful and entertaining, but the recommendations above can devalue experimentation and risk because they are vague and written from an almost haughtily disconnected position. Nevertheless, a ‘top’ London school has planned a ‘failure week’, in which pupils will learn to ‘embrace risk [and] build resilience (Burns 2012: para. 1) – at which point they are no longer embracing risk because it has become safe: the fundamental paradox which dogs this entire analysis.

If a risk is a failure, it may be because the risk was misunderstood instead of the failure being celebrated. Hickethier urges creative practitioners to be ‘more open’, warning them not to expect certain results (cited in Heller, 2011: 146), and Lindström offers the important caveat that ‘experiments and risk-taking do not always bring successful results’ (2006: 61, 63). For example, Penguin’s experiment with typographic Graham Greene covers to replace the illustrated ones was a dramatic commercial failure (Godfrey, 2012: 64); the covers reverted to their original illustrated style. But the typographic covers were quite conservative and essentially the existing illustrated covers without the image (Figure 2.8). Penguin could have tried more radical typography; they chose to gamble on a cover strongly related to the previous one. They had a choice of risks – they may simply have chosen the wrong one.

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Figure 2.8. Penguin Graham Greene covers: (left) typographic version; (right) Paul Hogarth illustrated version (1972).

2.3.3 What is risk in visual arts practice?

Practitioners and course planners emphasise exploration and celebrate sketchbooks as opportunities to take risks and develop work. Sketchbooks are routinely submitted for scrutiny and assessment in visual arts UK HE courses. Sketchbooks have two functions (the same sketchbook can do both): firstly, to experiment, explore and reflect; secondly, to develop work in preparation for the final piece. Del Torto sees the sketchbook as ‘ally [against] logic’, suggesting a revolt against apparently grounded thinking; Kurata as a way of being ‘honest’ with himself, suggesting a revolt against complacency and self-congratulation; Masunouchi as ‘exploration’, implying that work outside the sketchbook is safe; Morais as ‘revenge’ against the constraints of commissions, suggesting he is impotently frustrated by reality; Wales as a way of avoiding formulaic work (all Brereton 2009: 62, 184, 190, 196, 230). These examples are broadly typical, and suggest practitioners who are aware of their potential; they also unearth a mismatch between idealised rough preparatory work and level-headed final outcome.

A non-creative no-risk zone has been constructed in these sketchbooks by acknowledging, sanctioning and promoting this mismatch. Yet Koestler sees creativity as interlocking ‘two previously unrelated skills or matrices of thought’ (Mithen 1996: 58); Mednick and Mednick recognise this duality by claiming that the ‘more mutually remote the elements of the new combinations, the more creative is the process or solution’ (cited in Dacey and

Madaus, 1969: 56); Brown sees ‘synthesis’ as rare, and a possible basis for creativity (1999: para. 1). These are pertinent definitions because they address the mismatch, above (between rough preparatory work and level-headed final outcome), which the practitioners discussing sketchbooks do not. Boden claims that romanticism provides ‘no understanding of creativity’ – perhaps she is thinking of the sometimes parodied, maybe clichéd moment of blinding inspiration – and claims that Koestler’s earlier recognition of this meant that he considered creativity as the ‘bisociation of matrices [the] juxtaposition of formerly unrelated ideas’ (all 1992: 5). Koestler’s approach might be thought logical, if laborious, perhaps lacking flair, but Boden cautions against dismissing his formula as mechanistic: any ‘mere automatic mixing of ideas’ (Boden 1992: 23) would be an indiscriminate process lacking the insights implicit in Koestler’s articulation of previously unarticulated analogies, the search for illuminating parallels – the ‘similarity is not offered on a plate’ (Boden 1992: 181). The inference is that Koestler believes that one does not passively receive creative insights but must actively seek them, an ‘*intellectual illumination* – seeing something familiar in a new, significant light’ (Koestler 1976: 383, emphasis in original) in which a problem is identified, evidence is sifted, conditions and possibilities analysed, and a solution found – constructed, almost.

Koestler’s ideas are echoed in some QAA Subject Benchmark Statements, in which development is called for in creation of final pieces (an iterative process – which some might see as uninspiring and indirectly linked to PDP-style reflection and antithetical to the moment of blinding inspiration), and in which both ‘convergent and divergent thinking’ is advocated (The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2008: 7). It may be that QAA considered these latter thinking modes as separate – indeed, it would presumably take a truly creative mind (in Koestler’s bisociative terms) to make the process, as set out here, cyclical. This would be done by adding convergence to what had *already* (perhaps independently and separately) converged and then diverged. QAA do not articulate Koestler’s position, but it is not fanciful to suggest it might be an implicit challenge for a game practitioner and active reader of such documentation.

There is no risk in a sketchbook, however exploratory the work, because of the sketchbook’s function to demarcate between the ideal and the real. However daring work might *seem* to be, its creativity has not been truly ignited until it is tested *outside* the comfort-zone of the sketchbook. Cameron’s view that an experiment should have no preconceived ‘end product’ (2001: para. 1) is not unconditionally borne out by sketchbook experiments if these are not transferred to a risky arena; as Robinson *et al.* argue, ‘scrapbook’ inspiration is not enough on its own unless the work is transformed into something new (2011: 15).

For Gregory, the sketchbook offers ‘intimacy and unguarded freedom’ (2008: 1); Jones does not think sketchbook work needs any conclusion: it opens up discussion instead, and contains the ‘liberating processes that lead to the finished work’ (2011: 1); Heller and Talarico are less inhibited when they claim that a sketchbook is a ‘portal into a world where anything can happen’, although they quickly qualify this by adding, perhaps cautiously, that it is ‘first and foremost, a means to an end’ (2010: 7), and Steer, cited in Robinson *et al.* says sketchbooks are a ‘voyage of discovery’ (2011: 1). These few examples suggest that sketchbook work could be near-blissful, but they are

contradictory nonetheless: a ‘voyage of discovery’ may not lead to the ‘finished work’, any more than a ‘means to end’ is ‘intimacy and unguarded freedom in a world where anything can happen’. These contradictions point to the difficulties and confusions of sketchbooks arising from an almost idealistic lack of clarity and consistency about what they can actually do. Koestler’s bisociative theory could be called upon to reconcile such contradictions, although one should presumably guard against using Koestler as a silver-bullet for *any* inconsistencies or contradictions in order not to relegate his theory to the status of an expedient.

However, some sketchbook work *is* remarkable, but because of their status this remarkable work is often self-referential and not transferred into the final piece, or is so complete it *cannot* be transferred (Figure 2.9). Additionally, the emphasis on being able to document the development of work, and the underlying assumption on behalf of staff and course planners that this process inevitably produces better work, might make the creative process predictable and plodding, and might deter students from trusting sudden inspiration and their instincts to take risks.

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Figure 2.9. A visual arts student sketchbook; this is customised with a carefully constructed, decorated and varnished cover, and has become an object of such integrity and quality that it could be argued that it has become self-referential, raising the question: what might its function actually be? (Anon. Coventry University 2011: photo by Simon Bell).

We have seen many commentators point out that creativity is unruly, yet this putatively innate unruliness is at odds with the leaden insistence on following particular rules of development. In different creative domains, artists have valued irrational inspiration: for Tchaikovsky, the ‘germ of a future composition comes suddenly and unexpectedly’ (1970: 57); A. E. Housman reminisces that ‘two of the stanzas, I do not say which, came into my head, just as they are printed, while I was crossing the corner of Hampstead Heath between the Spaniard’s Inn and the footpath to Temple Fortune’. The third stanza took ‘coaxing’, and the fourth took 13 rewrites and a year to perfect. By this uneven and extended process Housman risked inconsistency, yet he was confident enough to ignore any such

misgivings. Housman would sometimes write a draft ‘leaving gaps’, hoping for inspiration, not segregating the rough from the final (all Housman 1933: 50). Lindström also questions the relevance of process criteria in relation to visual arts practice: if the work improves, ‘does it matter how?’ (2006: 61). However, it takes confidence to resist institutional pressure to conform, and it may seem unnecessarily and inadvisedly risky to students to do so, because they may well believe that rules are put there for good reasons by well-intentioned and experienced staff (which is generally – and thankfully – the case, although there can be mismatches between how staff and students perceive good reasons and intentions).

Repeatedly successful experiments involve no risk, and only tell us what we already know (Lindström 2006: 63). For example, in his celebrated *Ray Gun* magazine Bryan Ferry interview, David Carson substituted the unreadable font Zapf Dingbats for a conventional font as a ‘personal reaction to the dull text’ (Figure 2.10). The risk paid off: Carson’s approach ‘won him many critics as well as fanatical support’ (both Blackwell 1998: 153). Carson’s design is illegible, perhaps the risky antithesis of what graphic designers are expected to produce. However, given that Carson’s and other *Ray Gun* designers’ experiments were ‘chaotic, abstract and distinctive, but sometimes illegible’ (Design is History, n.d.: para. 2), it could be argued that Carson could have risked more had he produced a conservative design: his design was what his readership expected, and thus comfortable and not especially risky. Additionally, the spread’s layout is neither innovative nor skilful nor technically avant-garde: a simple keystroke has changed it into a talking-point. This might be what makes it notorious amongst design purists: Carson’s sheer lack of effort and use of a conventional chassis for a radical concept mixes registers and risks professional opprobrium. The article was also reproduced conventionally at the end of the magazine: this could be read as an even bigger but different risk: readers are given the original text and thus asked to judge whether it *was* in fact dull enough to deserve Zapf Dingbats, thus putting the magazine’s judgement truly on the line. The decision might equally have been to avoid another risk, that of Ferry suing the magazine. Four types of risk emerge from this example, demonstrating how hard it is to quantify.

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Figure 2.10. *Ray Gun*: Bryan Ferry interview magazine spread, designed by David Carson (1994, issue 21: page no. unavailable).

By contrast, the Chapman Brothers' 1993 *Disasters of War*, in which Goya's nineteenth-century *Disaster* engravings are reworked, could be said to experiment riskily with audience reception rather than try to contain it, as *Ray Gun* does: Collings describes the Chapman Brothers' 'low model-making techniques [...] which have a certain fascination but which we don't associate with the heroism or tragedy of art'. The Chapman Brothers want to 'drag refined aesthetic natures towards something more base' (2000: 73, 89); this could equally apply to their antithesis, the Stuckists, Item 14 of whose Manifesto castigates Brit Art (and thus, by association, the Chapman Brothers) for being 'sponsored by Saatchi, mainstream conservatism and the Labour Government [which] makes a mockery of its claim to be subversive or avant-garde' (1999). If one accepts that Brit Art has become a norm, then the Stuckists' rejection of that norm might seem riskily brave given Brit Art's status, even though Stuckist work might seem conventional. Risk is here measured in terms of Portillo's challenge of 'existing norms and conventional boundaries' (2002: para. 50), in terms of attitude and context and not by any absolutes of form such as handling, technique, or use of materials.

The 2007 Cadbury's drumming gorilla advert was special because of its 'out and out weirdness' (Williams 2008); the temptation to make a new advert in this existing style might be both risky and / or conservative. It might be risky to hope for success without trying something new, given the innovative precedent, and it might be conservative – safe – to adapt an already successful campaign. A new campaign might be risky because some consumers might expect the old campaign to continue; a new campaign (whatever it was) might be conservative because of the precedent which persuades consumers to accept whatever new campaign was used. The cynic might thus dismiss

risky practice as the safe province of the successful and celebrated, as the examination of documentation in the previous section suggested; hence Collings describes Picasso's 'myth' as the 'protean genius [who] risked ugliness instead of beauty' (2006: 26). One could argue that Picasso's audience is intimidated by the prospect of questioning this mythic status, and distrusts its own reactions: Picasso's reputation as risk-taker is – paradoxically – safe.

2.3.4 What might inhibit risk-taking in visual arts practice?

Given this emphasis on exploration and failure, it is surprising how prescriptive some contemporary visual arts commentary can be. Ambrose and Harris's grandly titled *The Fundamentals of Creative Design* recommends certain types of creativity and working methods. It cites Dieter Rams (1987) declaring that 'simple is better than complicated' (2011: 36), and although this *is* often seen as a core tenet of graphic design in particular, it is a dangerously reductive mantra: by simple, does Rams mean a clear, uncluttered design or one that *works* simply? A clear, uncluttered design may mystify those expecting something fussier – genre plays a big part here, and Rams seems to ignore it.

Rams's dated legacy of modernism confuses *absolutes* of form with *effects* of form (see also 2.3.3), a failing Ambrose and Harris later perpetuate by declaring that the 'objective of layout' is to help the reader receive 'visual and textual elements [...] with the minimum of effort' (2011: 33). This may seem true at first for a sales catalogue, for example, but even this may benefit from some careful ambiguity which helps readers to encounter more than they might have at first intended.¹⁹ The precept of simplistic clarity is clearly not shared by Carson and successful practitioners such as psychedelic poster designers and the Vienna Secessionists (Figures 2.11 and 2.12).

¹⁹ Supermarket layouts are a case in point: careful layout designed to promote impulse buying (*Shop 'til You Drop* 1998).

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Figure 2.11. (Left) Psychedelic poster (Wilson 1960s).

Figure 2.12. (Right) Vienna Secession exhibition programme (Moser 1902).

However, if this is taken deeper, Ambrose and Harris are right. A ‘minimum of effort’ could mean an instant message; Wilson’s and Moser’s works are both hard to read but convey an instant sensation and, working exactly like vague language, segregate a community of readers who *will* understand – and / or *want* to understand – what might seem obscure to others. Booth-Clibborn and Baroni find Wilson’s text ‘difficult to read [and] a pretext for the purpose of impressing a visually psychedelic effect onto the whole’ (1980: 144), supporting the argument that Wilson was designing for a captive audience: it did not matter how illegible the poster was, provided it was *recognised* as psychedelic. The Vienna Secession was a ‘counter-movement’ to Art Nouveau (Meggs 1992: 222), suggesting it had a driving and unifying ethos. Wilson and Moser risk illegibility and violating poster design rules about instant recognition; but equally they risk alienation from their regular audience if they deviate from their community’s norms and threaten the ‘familiarity with the graphic languages already understood by the target audience [which is] crucial to the development of effective design solutions’ (Noble and Bestley 2005: 121). These posters are safe and communicate clearly, and only controversial when taken *out* of a context which condones risk. Ambrose and Harris may mean this, they may not; students and new practitioners may have the experience or confidence to read these possibilities into Ambrose and Harris’s words, they may not: and if not, a productive dimension of risk might be ignored.

Insistence on domain boundaries can also create interdisciplinary stasis and compliant reliance on domain norms – citing Gardner, Parker insists that the ‘form of intelligence depends upon the domain in which the individual excels’ (2005: 187). Domains make organisational sense, especially in larger visual arts institutions with many students where factors such as room size and disseminating staff specialisms can be an issue, but students undertaking brave cross-over work at university risk this enterprise being deemed irrelevant by industry (which may not recognise or respect domain boundaries) in the same way that sketchbook risk is not really risky until transferred to a meaningful context. For example, Ambrose and Harris’s judgement that ‘unobtrusive is better than exciting’ (2011: 36) might make more sense in book than fashion design, but is strangely prescriptive for a postmodern text. By contrast, incontrovertible *practical* judgements *can* be demonstrably subverted: for example, white on black is a stronger contrast than black on white, and margins are an ‘aid to legibility’ (Steer n.d.: 48, Simon 1954: 21). These statements offer cross-domain opportunities (both could be applied to fashion design, for example, with some Koestlerian imagination), opportunities which can in themselves also enrich their original domain. Unlike Ambrose and Harris, Steer and Simon are not recommending a design approach (despite discussing specifics).

Students should look outside themselves and their domains for the licence and empowerment to take risks because creativity involves ‘changing a domain and ways of thinking within that domain’ (Zimmerman 2009: 387); students may find ‘creative thinking’ difficult if they have not learned ‘underlying dispositions and strategies for thinking in new and divergent ways’ (James 1999-2000: 110); people are not ‘accustomed to thinking hard [and] are often content to trust a plausible judgement that quickly comes to mind’ (Gardner 2009: 35). Ambrose and Harris’s approach can be reassuring, but can also become more like a *vade mecum* than a raft of views with which to engage productive design debate (especially if presented authoritatively) to students or practitioners emerging into an uncertain economic and intellectual climate.

‘Irresponsibility had weakened [White Fang]’ (London 1994: 91), and too much specialization and postponing the ‘acceptance of responsibility’ should be avoided (Sayers 1947: para. 1): taking responsibility is valued as a declaration of autonomy. Sayers’s principal concern is that students do not learn how to learn because they are not taught how to think (1947: paras 4, 14), a point anticipated indirectly by von Clausewitz. Although writing about war in the early years of the nineteenth century, von Clausewitz’s points about autonomy and thinking without constraints are still pertinent, and especially so in this discussion, because his success as a result of his credo is more tangible than that of either London or Sayers. Von Clausewitz believed that his job was not to instruct commanders, but to guide them in their ‘self-education’ (2007: 90). A notable auto-didact, von Clausewitz aimed his book at practitioners, to improve their judgement of war and not as a blueprint of how to fight (In Our Time 2012). Von Clausewitz dismissed manuals as pointless, declaring that it is not possible to ‘construct a model for the art of war that can serve as a scaffolding on which the commander can rely for support at any time’ (2007: vii, 89). Von Clausewitz’s ideas are backed up by solid results: Heuser argues that ‘few of his insights or theories are truly outdated [and many] have proved to be timeless’, and most pertinently in relation to the discussion, above, regarding specious domain boundaries, Heuser discerns ‘particular value’ in von Clausewitz’s ‘concept of war as a function of

several, interconnected variables' (2007: xxxii), an intellectual stance which predates – but could well accord with – Koestler's bisociative idea of creativity. Von Clausewitz sees the necessary complexity of the intellectual engagement; the enduring success of his ideas (In Our Time 2012) gives them an authority and importance that should not be discounted here.

Koestler's idea that creativity involves interlocking 'unrelated matrices' can perhaps be abstracted in visual arts terms into a stand-off between constraint and freedom, which Roberts and Wright see as epitomizing Sagmeister's resistance to design rules. They feel that restrictions provide a 'framework' and that creative work is usually a 'tug-of-war between what is possible and what is not' (2010: 12, 218). This awareness helps give a purpose to risk, and thus a meaningful mandate, but it also restricts risk to domain-based activities, because the rules emerging from a framework of restrictions will be largely – if not unexceptionally – domain-based in the first place: Kirsch and Houssemand see 'domain specificity [...] applying essentially to risk taking in the artistic domain' (2012: 5787). This could mean that domain specificity offers opportunities for risks (although this is not explicitly stated), but also, by implication, that the risks might equally seem self-referential, trivial and irrelevant once applied to any bigger and less easily negotiated industrial context.

Ambrose and Harris anthropomorphize fonts, claiming that some are 'authoritative, while others are playful' (2011: 78), a misleading generalisation also made by Steer (Figure 2.13). Steer, however, made his statement *before* postmodernism and the mid-twentieth century codification of reader-response, both of which should licence some argument: the postmodern climate seems to have cowed Ambrose and Harris enough to make them need controls on expression. Anthropomorphism is a powerful segregator and organiser of thought and opinion – witness its extended use in children's books – and it could be criticised here for preventing design self-expression or risk because it is presented as a plausible domain truth. It could also be seen as prompting debate, and thus prompting risk, but certainty of meaning might well be attractive for many students and emerging practitioners in the current economic climate.

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Figure 2.13. Anthropomorphised font descriptions from the 1930s (Steer n.d.: 99).

Furedi believes that society's reluctance to 'engage positively with risks' (2006: vii) is symptomatic of this climate. Arguing that 'younger generations feel threatened by a lack of clarity about the rules of behaviour' (there is surely some sanctuary in any clear rules of creativity), he claims that students (the 'younger generations'), routinely avoid conflict (both 2006: 6), and that 'absence of certainty underwrites caution, and caution inflates risk to justify itself' (2006: 156). Furedi believes that universities promote 'infantilism' by parading support services which thus presume student frailty and problematized lives. Discussing *The Fall*, Griselda Pollock argues that 'with rules you have no morality; only when you have [...] the knowledge of right and wrong do you have choice, do you have adult maturity' (In Our Time 2004). *The Fall* is pertinent here – if it was not innocent it was *knowing*, and thus flirted disastrously with the risk of transgression. There is sanctuary in clarity, even if a disingenuous sanctuary (this latter being at least evidence of critical awareness and engagement).

Coupled with universities' emphasis on employability and aligning courses with external interests, Furedi's claim that universities are discouraged from challenging students and marginalizing their 'independence and self-reliance' (both 2006: 125) seems timely and plausible. 2012 statistics show a 6.6% fall in English university admissions, which could be because of 'punitive financial barriers' (Sally Hunt, UCU, BBC 2012). The current climate might discourage risk-taking; but it could equally be argued that it will make risk meaningful because it is so antithetical to it. The current climate has made many people 'risk-averse' (Kotorov, BBC 2010: para. 7) and unable to capitalise on emerging insights and developments. Furedi accuses Western society of associating daring with 'negative character traits', and its obsession with safety and 'conviction that innovations are inherently risky'; of creating a blame culture, the 'corollary' of which is a 'feeble sense of personal responsibility for one's predicament' (2006: 10, 13, 38, 11, 12).

2.4 Provisional meaning

2.4.1 Introduction

Provisional meaning is relevant to this study because it might accentuate the formal (for example, layout, shape, juxtapositions, rhythms, visual emphases) as readers / users resort to analysis of what is before them in their interpretive endeavours. Provisional meaning might also offer creative challenges and be risky because it might be seen to question the fundamental clarity of the monological, this being frequently, in both my educational and industrial experience, pedestalized as an ultimate goal. Provisional meaning is not fixed: it may, at any stage, become less provisional, more provisional, not at all provisional or remain as provisional as it originally was. Meaning may be provisional for two reasons: firstly, because it is not fully articulated by the writer and thus relies in part or in whole on the reader's²⁰ interpretation; secondly because the text is deliberately obscure or non-committal, and will also be subject to vagaries of reader and context. This part of the literature review is in three sections: reader-response (2.4.2), vague language (2.4.3) and an examination of provisional meaning in selected examples of visual arts practice (2.4.4).

2.4.2 Reader-response

Reader-response is a mid-twentieth century literary theory that 'focuses on the reader or audience reaction [rather] than the text itself', which is complete but argued to have 'no meaning' until experienced by a reader (both Poetry Foundation n.d.: para 1). For Macey, meaning is 'produced by readers' (2001: 324), and Rosenblatt's reader is '*active* [and] not a blank tape registering a ready-made message' (1969: 34, emphasis in original). Reader-response celebrates an invigorated reader, whose birth is at the 'cost of the death of the Author' (Barthes 2001: 189): 'what a text does [in reader-response] is more important than what it is' (Macey 2001: 324). Reader-response rejects new criticism's early twentieth century celebration of 'self-contained meaning' in literature (Fish 1980: 2). Fish condemns conventional new critical formal analysis for ignoring affective force and objective truths about the *activity* of reading. He sees reader-response analysis of 'doings and happenings' as truly objective because it recognises the 'fluidity [...] of the meaning experience' (all 1980: 44, emphasis in original). However, a new critical stance might be familiar and appropriate to visual arts HE practice where work is discussed and defended objectively, and then assessed and graded.

²⁰ 'Reader' will be taken from here to mean anyone accessing or engaging with or exposed to a 'text'. 'Text' will be taken to a written piece but might later equally refer to a piece of visual arts practice. This is to avoid repetitions of 'reader', 'viewer' etc. and will be continued unless a particular distinction between reading and viewing, for example, is necessary.

Barthes criticises the traditional ‘*explanation* of a work’ being always in its producer; he sees this as a ‘tyrannically’ author-centric approach (both 2001: 186, emphasis in original). Fish sees the reader’s response as not addressing meaning but actually *being* the meaning, with the reader ‘freed from the tyranny of the text and given the central role in the production of meaning’ (1980: 3, 7), and Iser’s reader is ‘stimulated into filling blanks with projections [to] supply what is not said’ (1980: 111). Reader-response might therefore tempt visual arts students and practitioners who lack interest and / or confidence in their writing to disengage (from writing) because the reader is there to construct meaning so autonomously.

But reading is complex (Rosenblatt 1969: 43, Barthes 2001: 188) because writing has ‘multiplicity [...] everything is to be disentangled, nothing deciphered’ (Barthes 2001: 188). This suggests that *multiple* meanings are in the text, waiting to be activated and resolved by the reader: the meanings may be confusing and overlapping but they do not exist in a complete form awaiting *translation*, as might dead languages. Disentangling suggests awareness of different possible meanings, applying order when reading, and choosing appropriate meanings depending on context. This redistributes responsibility between reader and writer: the original text cannot be discounted, because, as Iser points out, a reader ‘sets the work in motion’ (1980: 106), giving it agency of its own. The short essay will therefore need considered content to avoid seeming simplistic. Reader-response is a double-edged sword because its readers will now be looking for meaning and may of course feel cheated if they cannot find it.

Fish values interpretive communities as a defence against accusations of ‘the rankest subjectivism’ – reader-power out of control (1980: 11). This inclines him towards reception study, which is defined by Harkin as an ‘inquiry into a text’s effect on specific classes of readers’ (2005: 411). Fish’s reader is palpably a ‘construct [...] ideal or idealized’, crucially informed²¹ (1980: 48, emphasis in original). Fish’s later (1980) reader is not a ‘free agent’, able to construct literature in ‘any old way’, but part of a ‘community’ with shared ‘assumptions’. Fish sees criticism and interpretation as collective decisions creating ‘interpretive communities’ (all 1980: 11). This is especially important given Lodge’s view that a text is open to ‘multiple, indeed infinite, interpretation’ (1997: 192). Fish’s ‘interpretive communities’ reassure via safety in numbers: meaning is validated by more than one person. However, this might create bland work because it tries to appeal to a mass audience – this is the importance of multiple meanings. Quality need not suffer just because the audience is expanding, as meaning can be layered and varied: it might mean one basic thing to all, but might have many subtle inflections for many. But numbers do not guarantee objectivity, and could undermine it by collectively endorsing a subjective stance which might have been evidentially rejected by a lone reader. Against that, an interpretive community can make writers and makers a better functioning target audience because it has the weight of many, and lacks the distracting specifics of an individual.

Reader-response was an ‘important part of the wider concern with popular participation’ of its time (Harkin 2005: 414). For example, Tinker summarises his mid-twentieth century legibility research thus: ‘to some degree [...] we perceive what we want to perceive’ (Spencer 1969: 18). If perception is selective then it follows that interpretation

²¹ Gray sees the informed reader as similar to the ‘implied’ reader, and traces the term back to David Hume’s 1741 essay ‘Of the Standard of Taste’, whose ‘ideal’ reader has to downplay his individuality in a bid to ‘rid himself of the distortions of prejudice’ (1992: 147).

will be too. However, many authors devolved interpretation to readers before and after the mid-twentieth century. Folkenflik quotes Locke's declaration that the 'same words produced different ideas in different minds' and Rousseau's that readers produce results (2006: 685, 686). Iser sees meaning in Fielding's 1742 *Joseph Andrews* as 'clearly waiting to be formulated', picks up on eighteenth-century novelist Richardson insisting that a story must 'leave something for the reader to do' (Folkenflik 2006: 679, 680), and draws attention to Woolf's observation that Austen made readers 'supply what is not there' (1980: 110). Mills explains that Dostoyevsky's readers are 'compelled to speculate, infer and, increasingly explain and piece together the novel for themselves', and that the narrator has 'abdicated authority' (2004: xxix-xxx, xxxii); Lodge declares that 'text is not something that the author creates and hands over to the reader, but that the reader produces in the act of reading' (1997: 194).

These examples indicate a broad applicability for reader-response, which Harkin endorses and amplifies when claiming its relevance to 'stories, poems plays, buildings, films, TV ads, clothes, body piercings' (2005: 413). Harkin asserts that reader-response is 'thoroughly normalized' nowadays, and 'integral to any reading of any text' (2005: 412). This reminds visual arts students and practitioners that readers might well make meaning whatever the process is called, and whether the meaning readers extract is the intended one or not (readers may of course make no meaning at all – this, too, is their prerogative and perhaps perversely a kind of meaning in itself, nihilistic overtones notwithstanding). Because of the immediacy of creative experience and the power of an institution – a context – many visual arts students and practitioners might not be able to imagine their work functioning outside that context.²² Reader-response can alert them to possible readings and misreadings, and to risk-obviating complacency. The short essay could be ideal here because its claimed multiple and ambiguous meanings provide readers and writers with ongoing options.

Fish's ideas and 'informed readers' 'presumed careful training and superior intelligence' (Harkin 2005: 417), an élitism that Harkin now feels has been eliminated by reader-response's universal absorption: it can be the useful province of 'any old reader' (2005: 415, 416). She concedes, however, that reader-response interpretation could be difficult, and not easily or intuitively removed from the literary to the visual – 'students need explicit instruction in reading all kinds of texts' (2005: 418) – and she feels that contemporary teaching should 'take risks in order to teach better' (2005: 422). Harkin believes that students need help to become motivated and self-critical: students may stop at safe subjectivity, doing what they think is easiest and most likely to succeed: objectivity may now seem more risky than subjectivity, and not least because it is unexpected in *this* context (see Koestler, above, 2.3.3).

Collaborative textual silences induce the 'reader to provide [...] information desired by the writer' (Huckin 2010: 420), a reader-response overlap. By silences Huckin means physical gaps – the rhetorical power of silence (2010: 419) – in the sense of missing material and not Iser's 'blanks', which are readings of existing text offering

²² I have had direct experience of this whilst teaching at Coventry University's School of Art and Design. In 2005, I asked a Fine Art student to move her ongoing work from her usual studio space on the fifth floor to a display wall in the basement in order to prompt her to see it differently. The experiment worked, and her understanding of her practice changed: she realised that the studio conditions had been too big a player in fashioning her output.

interpretive options. Huckin calls involuntary omissions ‘benign’ (2010: 421); in visual arts student writing, they might be enforced and / or self-inflicted, perhaps caused by word count restrictions, ignorance of subject, lack of research, irrelevance of content, errors, or bad time management and are benign because they are unintentional in the sense that they could have perhaps been avoided by more care or better preparation, for example (on the assumption that the students did not willfully avoid doing as well as possible).

Textual silences can also hide ‘important information from the reader [...] to the advantage of special interests’. For example (understandably, perhaps) obituaries omit information ‘unfavorable to the deceased’ (both Huckin 2010: 420, 422). If short essays embrace short story notions about form, and exploit silences (in a reader-response sense), criticisms of lack of content and other shortcomings may be deflected. Huckin argues that genre expectations will necessarily create omissions (2010: 423). Genre can dominate, minimizing individuated contributions, but it can also be a useful conduit for fast-tracking meaning and setting up interpretive communities. The presuppositional silence (Huckin 2010: 429) might be a rebellious reluctance to tell readers what they already know, and thus a polite, not to say disingenuous, reluctance to patronize the reader, who will have no idea if the writer is being benignly or maliciously silent. The presuppositional silence is risky because readers’ reactions are unpredictable: however, short essays may deflect misreadings back onto readers if readers are seduced enough by short essays’ perfect form and unapologetic shortness to believe that there must be more to them.

2.4.3 Vague language

Vague language is conversational, informal, and not new – ‘sort of’, for example, was apparently first used in 1790 (Merriam-Webster n.d.); Channell and Cutting, however, reflect a more contemporary interest. Channell disagrees that the best writing avoids ‘vagueness, ambiguity [and] imprecision’, finding this view prescriptivist (Crystal 2003: 366), too simple and ‘positively misleading’. She implies that vague language is popular and anti-élitist, claiming that ‘good’ language uses a ‘good deal of vagueness’ (all 1994: 1).

Cutting describes vague language as deliberately ‘non-specific [and] imprecise’, using words like ‘stuff’ and approximations like ‘around six’ (all 2007: 6). She observes that there is ‘more than one perception and definition of vague language’ (2007: 3), thus underscoring vague language’s changeability. What is vague to one person might be clear to another; this highlights the importance of community (‘shared knowledge’, echoing Fish’s interpretive communities) and of context (Cutting citing Channell 2007: 5) – for example, Green supplies eight possible definitions of ‘hot’, none of which relates to physical temperature (1995: 178). Timing becomes critical as expressions become accepted into everyday discourse: ‘off the wall’, for example, was once a marginal phrase but now appears in mainstream media. Vagueness is thus context-dependent in the broadest sense.

Speakers and writers using vague language have to ‘tailor’ their work to make it ‘suitable to the situation’ (Channell 1994: 3). Visual arts practitioners should also contextualise their creative work carefully: this helps connect visual arts writing to visual arts practice. Vague language’s apparent looseness might help it fit specific spaces, echoing a constraint familiar to much visual arts practice. This same looseness may ensure meaning is retained in some form because vague language terms can have overlapping meaning (Cutting, citing Channell 2007: 5), calling for careful handling, especially if specific meaning is intended and the possibilities and fall-out of the *wrong* meaning have not been fully appreciated.

Visual arts students might be attracted by Evison *et al.*’s claim that vague categories are at the ‘creative forefront of language use’ (2007: 142), although we have seen that some visual arts students dislike ‘creative’ writing – see 2.6, footnote 41. Additionally, what is meant by ‘creative’ is opaque: it could simply mean here language that is unfamiliar or unwelcome in a particular context, like swearing. Vague language champions need to be careful in this respect if this *is* what they mean, because they also claim that vague language relies heavily on context to make sense: but if creativity in their terms involves breaking contextual consensus then it is illogical. Creativity does not have to be logical, but this kind of illogicality might make even Koestler despair. Many visual arts students in my experience use awkward and unfamiliar registers to give their academic writing authority, or even to depersonalise it. Rampant subjectivity is generally discouraged in academic writing, but depersonalised objectivity which refutes ownership of writing because it seems irrelevant (which we have seen it does to some visual arts students – see Chapter 1) should also be discouraged. Vague language might help visual arts students reclaim their writing if they feel they are losing touch with it. But vague language might seem risky to visual arts students for three reasons: it might seem subversive in academic contexts; it might risk staff censure; it might miscommunicate.

Vague language is ‘inherently and intentionally imprecise’ (Cutting 2007: 4); phrases like ‘you know’ are imprecise, yet whether intentionally imprecise is vague. These phrases may signal a genuine inability to name or remember something: in this case they are intentionally used, but unintentionally vague. Vague language may thus generate a shared experience with receivers (who may have been in the same position before) even if receivers are not much wiser as to what is being meant. This connects with some visual arts practice (for example magazines and posters) in which nuance and sensation can be as important as hard fact.

‘An expression or word is vague’ if another can be found with the same apparent meaning (Cutting citing Channell 2007: 5), suggesting that the original meanings of both words have converged to become vague, loose and almost interchangeable: this may help writers to fit text carefully into specific spaces by using alternative words and minimising meaning compromise. These fine adjustments, common to much visual arts practice, will probably be more visible in a short essay than in a long one (whose scale can render them tiresome and difficult to accomplish); the extra visibility in a short essay highlights this technique, making it perhaps seem more subversive and more risky in a short essay than in a long essay. However, this technique may equally seem riskier in a long essay because of

the long essay's traditional heritage. Readers may find repeated uses of the technique tiresome and more contrived in a long essay, and it thus becomes devalued to gimmickry: the risk is relative and very hard to predict.

Evison *et al.* describe vague language as a powerful and effective communicator and cite the 'collaborative making of meaning' as a constructive product of vague language (2007: 138, 142). Cutting sees vague language as socially cohesive, strengthening common ground and reasserting group membership, a 'high-involvement' strategy whose 'in-group members' would understand the 'exact' meaning (2007: 226, 224). Using vague language out of context may confuse readers, but may intrigue them as well: *why* was the message said like that? Similarly, image and text in visual arts practice might have a deliberate register mismatch to attract attention, comment, and possibly alternative meanings leading to wider appeal: the link is not whimsical.

Vague language can be defended as creative, and 'far from vague in the negative sense of uninformative or sloppily constructed' (both Evison *et al.* 2007: 142). However, if meaning is collaboratively constructed, it does not matter how 'far from vague' the language is: presumably it is clearly understood by all parties because it is collaborative and 'context-sensitive' (2007: 154). Thus vague language is safe, and there are parallels in visual arts practice: for example, very audience-specific graphics, such as club flyers, which are genre-conscious and sensibly strategic (rather than riskily different) and reliably appeal to the same audience over and over.

Phrases like 'that sort of thing' can be a 'tool for creating short cuts' (Evison *et al.* 2007: 139). Evison *et al.* do not pursue this far enough, however: these phrases can also be a superfluous, nervous, almost subconscious habitual addition, and in this way some vague language thus *extends* text, however, making it physically longer (although perhaps reducing comprehension time): 'you know' is often added to enrich an already perfectly comprehensible phrase, a kind of ornament such as Trilling's 'elaboration of functionally complete objects' (2001: 6). Some short cuts can be risky because they can make meaning more precise if we accept that extensions such as 'that sort of thing' concede that what preceded them was vague, and that they are thus qualifiers. In this case, their vagueness needs to be acknowledged lest it be taken for truth: remove the extension, therefore, and it becomes truth, and creates a clearer and shorter text: a true short cut. Care needs to be exercised here: creative practice with precise meaning may become irrelevant if its target audience's behavioural patterns, size and appetites – and precise requirements – change. The 'short cuts' (above) are not the same as short texts in short stories, flash- and micro-fiction which create multiple meanings. Short cuts here (however articulated) mean direct, unambiguous communication. Adding a word or phrase may speed this up (making short cuts as Evison *et al.* understand them, above) – but it does not make short texts.

A man's short description of his day at work – 'oh – organizing bits and pieces' – might be interpreted by his wife in three ways: he has been doing something too complicated to explain; he does not want to bore her with a boring account; he does not want her to know that he did nothing much (Cutting 2007: 233). There are two more possibilities that Cutting – surprisingly, given that their very existence is down to vague language tenets – does not

mention: firstly, that the man does not need to elaborate because his wife already knows what his days are like; and, secondly, that his day *was* in fact spent organizing bits and pieces. The phrase is concise, does not use explicitly vague terms, but is *suggestive*. In this respect it works like the short story filtered through reader-response: there are multiple plausible meanings, and we can change our interpretation at will. Had the man elaborated, he would have narrowed the meaning: interpretive possibilities have been licenced by keeping the text short and perfectly formed with consistent register and even metre, not favouring one interpretation over another.

Cook declares literature with multiple and even contradictory meanings has not failed, claiming that the greatest literature creates ‘controversy and incompatible readings’. He takes critics to task for trying to find ‘the single true meaning’ instead of letting it remain ‘multiple or unclear’ (all 2007: 23). He explains that meanings increase ‘in proportion to the degree to which the writer is prepared to let go’ (all 2007: 24). Suggestion might be the obvious way to let go (although Cook does not specify this), especially as in reader-response readers are largely responsible for unearthing meaning. This leaves the writer free to disclaim responsibility, which has advantages in creative practice: it can make the work less insistent, perhaps more long-lived, creating a broader and unexpected audience; it can involve readers / users more and thus can flatter them, making them buy into the work and its message more comprehensively: ‘the greater the vagueness, the greater the text’ (Cook 2007: 24).

Like Iser and Fish, Cook wants to avoid self-indulgent and ill-judged reading, and supplies a caveat to interpretive multiplicity: interpretations should not be totally disconnected from their texts (a vague caveat, happily). He argues that we may disagree on the Christian orthodoxy of *Paradise Lost* but we are unlikely to call it comic (2007: 25). The parallels with visual arts practice are clear: multiple meaning can expand in depth, but practitioners should be careful about breadth. For example, a drink-drive poster might have a range of possible meanings revolving around irony: all aim to reduce drink-driving, none to endorse it. The connections with reader-response and the short story are not intended to make practice more facile, but to make it more fulfilling. I add a caveat of my own: Cook may be accused of over-simplifying his case by side-stepping authorial reputation and other New Historicist factors such as critical texts, reviews and discussions, for example, that will confirm Milton as non-comic. And of course some readers will find *Paradise Lost* – or bits of it – comic irrespective of *any* of these factors, or even because of them.

Channell summarises that vague language is not uncommon; it creates, and in turn relies on, shared knowledge and context; it is neither inherently good nor bad, but effective or ineffective instead; it can express thoughts for which the right language is absent. There is supporting evidence provided, although Channell does make three questionable points. Firstly, she claims that vague expressions have vague meanings which cannot be made more precise: however, some vague language has very specific meaning even if the words seem superficially vague. For example, Cutting asserts that ‘how’s your Chomsky?’ in a particular context clearly means an essay about Chomsky and not the man himself (2007: 224) – so precision emerges from vagueness, providing all parties are aware of the context and possibilities. Of course, the meaning in this case could be wildly misunderstood, but could still mean something (depending upon the understanding of ‘Chomsky’). Secondly, Channell says that vague expressions are not ‘empty

fillers'. However, expressions like 'whatsisname' can be disingenuous delaying tactics and very specifically and strategically used. It is not clear whether she means 'empty fillers' in a critical sense or not, nor whether she thinks people use them intentionally (and disingenuously) or carelessly (and subconsciously). Thirdly, she claims that vague expressions do not betray 'linguistic inadequacy [but a] competent language user' (all 1994: 196-197). However, an expression like 'stuff' can be sloppy inadequacy, a speaker not prepared to make an effort. It can also summarise a collection of objects; it can be sloppily inadequate or tactically deployed and *still* summarise a collection of objects. It is hard to prevent vague or visual language being misread – even slightly – whatever the originator's intentions, and possible misreadings can offer creative and risk-intensive capital.

2.4.4 Provisional meaning in visual arts practice

Much visual arts practice apparently rejoices in clarity of meaning: for example, 'Guernica' is Picasso's 'most powerful political statement [...] an immediate reaction [...] an anti-war symbol' (Anon. 2009: paras 1, 2). 'Guernica' can be debated and criticised, and, like vague language, its handling is idiomatic, but its intent is generally held to be indisputable.²³ Camus suggests art's purpose is to clarify: 'if all the world were clear, art would not exist' (n.d.), although whether that is achieved by indisputable clarity could be disputed: a true reader-response conundrum. Nonetheless, Camus is not suggesting that art's purpose has degenerated into confusion, and this is an important nuance: provisional meaning is not necessarily fuzzy, but is *clear for each reader*, so that readers can engage with a work whilst disentangling meaning *on their own terms*, with the responsibility *that* brings.

Visual arts vague language technique is used in the first UK cover of Nabokov's 'salacious' and controversial *Lolita*. This cover (Figure 2.14) was purely typographic (partly to reflect its original French cover – vague language creates communities) and partly to be 'anonymous', a 'form of disguise' (all Godfrey 2012: 66). However unambiguous and well-defined the lettering in a typographic cover might be, it is (because of *Lolita*'s reputation) nonetheless a vague language shorthand. The *Lolita* cover is a specific and design community-sanctioned way of flagging up contentious content, and thus draws attention to itself as vague language might. By tacitly acknowledging its difficulties, the cover is a euphemism which announces that it has something to hide. Many covers, probably the majority, even those dating from the 1950s, are illustrated: like vague language, this typographic one is in a noticeably different register: disingenuity at play).

The typographic book cover can be declared both a 'definitive statement' and 'timeless' because it is less prone to vagaries of style (Godfrey 2012: 66), but this is only partially true: typography can go in and out of fashion just as an image can, and fashion is a sanctuary: a true fashion victim makes few difficult choices if it is purely a matter of discerning trends and uncritically following them. To produce an on-trend cover which aims to connect with a definite audience risks desuetude and might still only connect with part of the audience, but the designer *can* blame

²³ Cf. Cook and Milton's *Paradise Lost*, above.

vagaries of fashion in audiences' tastes for bad results, and can thus abdicate responsibility. Thus precise meaning might be riskier than provisional meaning, reminding us how difficult and unwise it is to try to define both what risk is and where it best operates. A cover with provisional meaning that tries to persuade readers to interpret is risky in a different way – it risks missing its aims completely, because none of the above guarantees is in place: the reader must be active, and the work must in turn encourage active reading, although it might be argued that it is more likely to attract a new audience than a cover unswervingly aimed at a particular existing audience.

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Figure 2.14. *Lolita*: original UK cover (Weidenfeld & Nicolson 1959).

Specific cover design statements can have powerful impact, but they can also be limited and perhaps reductive because there is a hint of the simplistic about their approach. This problem is acute when designing classic covers for books whose publishing history means that visual interpretive possibilities are almost exhausted,²⁴ or books where it might be misleading to emphasise one aspect of its content over another – for example, a dictionary or a Bible. J. G. Ballard liked one particular cover for his novel *Crash* because he thought it 'quasi-realistic, but in the right way', because the book contained nothing quite like what was on the cover, and because the novel was hard to summarise in a 'single image'. A composite cover might have been the answer, but, as with reader-response, this might have compounded any mismatch as the interpretive swell gathered momentum. Ballard found another cover, which interpreted *Crash* as a 'psychotic hymn', too literal (all Poynor: 2004: 53, 54, 55). To interpret a theme with provisional meaning instead of literal visual language avoids crude analogy, but risks being so oblique that readers miss the point, making the cover irrelevant and self-referential.

²⁴ The titles in Penguin Books' 2012-13 cover design competition, for example, are *The Wind in the Willows* and *The Big Sleep*, originally published in 1908 and 1939 respectively. These have both had many different covers – a strategy for avoiding cliché and repeating previous designs might well be to back away from specifics of meaning.

Temptation and pressure to make a clear and unambiguous statement can be successfully resisted, however. Matthew Carter confesses that his ‘real contribution’ to *Private Eye*’s design was to ‘make sure it was not designed’ (Anon. 2012: 76). *Private Eye* has survived more or less unchanged since its 1960s inception – an design approach that successfully argues for provisional meaning and has clear practical advantages. The design has the integrity to deflect criticism and is so basic – essentially word-processed – that it calls on readers’ intelligent understanding and support (as does the magazine). Readers have clearly found the content accessible and the design its ‘transparent’ vessel (Warde 1955: paras 1, 2). The unchanging design is also an apt metaphor for the unchanging ethos of the magazine, and Carter’s understated approach allows readers of all persuasions to engage with the text on their own terms, and perhaps thus to rethink their persuasions because of the lack of direct pressure.

Poynor argues that [a particular poster’s] key lies in its ‘uncertainty’, which ‘keeps you looking at it long after an image that yields its meaning has ceased to be of interest’. Poynor feels that this poster does not solve a problem but presents the viewer with a problem to solve (both 1998: 15). Although not explicitly mentioning reader-response, Poynor claims that the viewer is drawn in: the poster demands – rather than evokes – an emotional response. However, the poster is ambiguous; thus ambiguity is solicited in a unambiguous and intolerant way – a demand. The risk is twofold: not only is ambiguity riskily provisional (in that its meaning might be misinterpreted), but it is being demanded and demands can be unceremoniously rejected, whereas evocation works by stealth. Risk and provisional meaning can have very complex interweaving – again calling for disentangling. Poynor appears to bemoan the ‘rational sense’ that informs design rhetoric (1998: 17) as if this will solidify meaning and dampen the creative challenge.

In the visual arts, provisional meaning should not be understood or practised as unclear, non-specific or tentative mark-making because this will denigrate its possibilities (although there is room for this kind of work if that is the aim): provisional meaning may well emerge from well-crafted and well-executed artefacts. Cameron, discussing interactive design, summarises this very ably by stating that the ‘product’ allows audience exploration instead of giving a direct message. He celebrates ‘open-ended and playful engagement’ by the audience. This does not mean that the message should be less ‘definitive or precise’ than in a more traditional domain (all 2001: para. 7). This is important because provisional meaning may deter practitioners who take pleasure and pride in giving their work clear meaning – which should not be devalued simply because it is working provisionally.²⁵ Provisional meaning does not mean one unclear meaning, but multiple clear meanings (although not necessarily clear to the same degree), and *different* meanings awaiting disentangling, not deciphering nor translating.

²⁵ Cf. Cook and Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, above.

2.5 The short story

2.5.1 Introduction

The short story has three main characteristics which suggest that it might be a suitable model in this study for visual arts students' short essays: its much debated and variable size, which may offer visual arts students the chance to customise their essays, and thus to take more responsibility for the essays' content and final presentation; its accentuation of the formal, especially its linking of form and content, which should appeal to the emphasis on plasticity inherent in much visual arts practice; its use of suggestion and subversion, which may encourage visual arts students to think more strategically about the content, style, omissions and reception of their writing in relation to their experiences of academic writing to date. The short essay should thus raise visual arts students' awareness of their associated practice, and could become a conduit to legitimising personalised risk in their work – that is, risk on their own terms and not on any externally validated / imposed terms.

This part is accordingly in three sections: the first deals with delimiting the short story; the second with two specific formal features – openings and repeats – which are examined here as exemplars of short story technique; the third with suggestion and subversion. The material analysed is short story literary criticism, principally but by no means exclusively the work of Bayley (1988), O'Faolain (1951) and Hawthorn (2001), who also cites O'Faolain. Bayley and O'Faolain are respected short story literary critics whose texts date from different periods. Although this period difference is interesting *per se*, there is little notable difference in their critical approaches which might seem attributable to their respective periods, and even some of the statements made by contemporary commentators and writers such as Hershman are not dissimilar to those made by O'Faolain 60 years before: both critics are quite uncompromising, which at least prompts critical debate. Bayley's work is perhaps more mellow, and thus meshes well with more contemporary critics, such as Hanson and Miall, who tend to intensify his views. Hawthorn (2001) opens up many useful current perspectives, as well as some illuminating insights in O'Faolain. The ideas of contemporary fabulist critics are also included, as are those of micro- and flash-fiction writers, and commentaries on six-word sagas and tweeting.

2.5.2 Delimiting the short story

Short stories, novellas and novels vary in length too much to be easily classified as such by word- or page-count alone. Borges's *The Witness*, for example, is one and a half paperback pages,²⁶ whereas de Maupassant's *Boule de*

²⁶ This and subsequent page measures are for purposes of comparison and of roughly similar paperback page sizes.

Suif is 49 pages: both are considered short stories. Compared to Richardson's *Clarissa* (just under 1,500 paperback pages), Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot* at just over 700 paperback pages might reasonably be called short. Renshaw decisively delimits micro-fiction as 'less than 400 words', with some exceptions pushing 750 (1998: para. 2). Word counts can be visualised and meaningfully compared in flash and micro-fiction because their relationship to their presentation format is generally more evident (another connection – if a little superficial – to much visual arts practice), but word counts can be less easily visually and meaningfully compared in longer fiction. Hershman imprecisely – and perhaps unwisely – declares that the short story is 'writing where every word counts, whose length is no more and no less than the story deserves' and that nothing in flash fiction is 'thoughtlessly' written (2009: 151, 159). These claims are specious, however, because they could equally apply to novels.²⁷

Hawthorn delimits the novel as a 'certain length' and the short story as 'twenty or thirty pages or fewer' (2001: 13, 14), although this now excludes *Boule de Suif*, above. He places the novella on the 'awkward boundary' (2001: 14) between the novel and the short story, and the novella at 15,000-30,000 words with the short story as 'likely' to be under 15,000 words (2001: 158).²⁸ He also declares that the short story is 'normally read at one sitting' (2001: 51), citing Poe's insistence²⁹ on this. Reading time³⁰ might be a more useful measure than page count because short fiction is often compared to film and drama, which are usually measured by time, and because some contemporary short fiction is moving into online modes and websites, where conventional length calculations are unreliable. Computer, tablet and smartphone screens can be enlarged, reduced and rotated, thus changing 'page' content. Imaginative alternatives include electronic file size restrictions,³¹ using available metal type resources,³² providing keywords that have to be used within fixed word counts,³³ and specifying story layout, although care should be taken not to allow the form to deteriorate into the potentially self-referential gimmickry of some more extreme

²⁷ Richardson is an example of a novelist who valued his words. In the Introduction to *Clarissa*, Ross describes Richardson as being 'early worried about the length of his new work' (1985: 15). This might seem entirely forgivable – at 1,500 pages it is a colossal novel. However, Richardson amended his second edition before entirely revising his third of 1751: this ended up 200 pages *longer* than the first edition (1985: 16).

²⁸ Hawthorn's arithmetic is questionable: to make his maximum of 30 pages, a 15,000 word short story would need to fit roughly 500 words per page: most paperback pages fit around 400 words maximum, taking the page count of a 15,000-word story to nearly 38 pages, 25% over Hawthorn's top limit, although he may well defend himself by citing his use of 'likely'.

²⁹ Poe expects hard reading: his stories in *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* collection, for example, are quite long and range in length from 15 to 53 paperback pages, with an average of just under 33 pages each, around 13,500 words, which is not far shy of Hawthorn's ideal short story maximum length of 15,000 words.

³⁰ Although reading speed and ability will affect reading time, they are outside the scope of this study.

³¹ This is not uncommon in multimedia and electronic publishing.

³² Metal type resources, although increasingly rare, still exist as specialised pursuits with enthusiastic followers, e.g. Blush Publishing, the Whittington Press and Hand & Eye Press in the UK. Some UK institutions offering art and design courses, such as University of Reading and Coventry University, still have metal type resources, and these are certainly imaginatively and regularly used at the latter institution, sometimes being mixed with digital technologies and sometimes with other handwork-based printing techniques such as etching; I do not have first-hand information as to how they are used at University of Reading.

³³ Websites such as flash.fiction.net provide a set of keywords around which a story has to be woven observing a restricted word count (September 2012).

constrained writing modes, such as lipograms, chaterisms or univocalism.³⁴ Hershman mentions the beautiful crafting of flash fiction chapbooks whilst celebrating the internet as an ‘excellent medium’ (2009: 168). From this, it is clear that some short fiction writers are currently exploring a range of technologies and options.

Short story characteristics also produce uncertain definitions. Clark and Lieber claim that ‘no art is more spontaneous than that of the short story’ (1964: v). This is positive but obscure: ‘spontaneous’ in what way, and for whom: writer or reader, or both? Is this restricted to literature? If not, then what about jazz, or graffiti, both of which thrive on spontaneity? The editors allude to a distinction between the ‘Short Story [and] the story that is short’, but frustratingly do not pursue this. However, whilst specifying that the short story must be ‘unified [...] must concern itself with but a single anecdote or episode or situation [...] must be of a certain length’, they dismiss these as ‘interesting and ingenious [...] but so far as they have influenced the writers of stories, they are of little importance’ (all 1964: v). They thus downplay these defining features, as well as being vague about length.

Renshaw sets out clear micro-fiction characteristics: it must be ‘strictly prose’, with intimate focus; it must fight expectation; be tight, harshly edited and soul-stirring, using literary imagery (1998: paras. 1-11). Hanson feels that the short story ‘has no inherent, defining characteristics’ (1989: 5), yet Gray, conceding that ‘it is difficult to define exactly at what point a short story turns into a novella or novel’, nevertheless goes on to assert that short story characteristics are ‘concentration on few characters [...] lack of complicated plot [...] leisurely description; swift dénouement; economical, dense writing [usually focusing on] a single incident or character’ (1992: 262-263). These features do not apply to Fielding’s 800-page novel *Tom Jones*, which has a complicated and magnificent plot,³⁵ rambling technique and unruly characterisation. It therefore remains a novel, according to Gray’s formalist criteria. *Clarissa*, however, *does* betray some of them: it concentrates on few characters, lacks a complicated plot and is very densely written, yet it is a monumental epistolary novel and clearly not a short story.³⁶

³⁴ I have experimented with short essays using layout restrictions to work with and / or to replace word count restrictions at Coventry University’s School of Art and Design since 2009 – see Appendix 5.

³⁵ This is rated by Coleridge as one of the three most perfect ever (cited by Mutter in his Introduction to the Penguin edition of *Tom Jones* (1988: 11)).

³⁶ It would not be fanciful to argue that each letter within *Clarissa* is a short story in itself, however, and that the whole novel is thus a carefully edited and assembled anthology. This conceit is given some substance by the very nature of the epistolary novel, in which the author usually renounces responsibility for the actual text, and, in the case of *Clarissa*, even refers to himself as ‘editor’ in his Preface (1985: 35). Epistolary novels also usually fragment the narrative into single events, or concentrations of events, or reports of events and so on, which justify the letter in the first place. This cogently connects form and content (an often-claimed short story characteristic) and also chimes with Gray’s criteria for defining the short story, above, with regard to the ‘exposition of a single incident or character’ (1992: 262-3). O’Faolain supports this argument, too, when he declares that Dickens used ‘flat [or] label-characters’ because, quite apart from the quantity of characters he was handling, the serialised publishing mode prevalent at that time meant that he was writing ‘episodically, and therefore became largely subject to the same limitations as the writers of short-stories who came after him’ (both 1951: 168). O’Faolain thus sees each episode or act of writing as a discrete unit, subject to its own rules and conventions. Dickens could not therefore write ‘across’ the episodes and had to resort to clipped, self-contained forms to make his writing work in the face of these restrictions.

Gray complicates the issue by stating that ‘most of [the above] qualities are simple consequences of the one defining factor of the short story: that it be short’ (1992: 263). He describes a novella as ‘somewhat longer than a short story, but not long enough to be considered a novel [which is] a long fiction almost always concentrating on character and incident, and usually containing a plot’ (all 1992: 200); which is of course a definition now broad enough to include both *Tom Jones* and *Clarissa*.

Gindin cites Coppard’s view that the short story needs ‘selection, omission, and exaggeration’ (1985: 114), (qualities which could equally apply to Kerouac’s 279-page *On the Road*). These qualities perhaps help create unity, which was felt necessary to the short story by both Bates and Coppard, who also valued the ‘mind or consciousness of a single character’ (all Gindin 1985: 114). These are common to both the short story *and* the novel, so inverting the issue may be more constructive: a short story perhaps cannot exist without ‘selection, omission, and exaggeration’, whereas a novel perhaps can.

Comparisons between the short story and other art forms also vary unhelpfully in this respect. Boyd likens the short story to an ‘exquisite miniature painting’ (Liggins et al. 2011: 1), giving it timeless poise, but many other commentators note a similarity to film and drama, the ‘quick image rather than long drawn out exposition’ (Charles 1964: ix; Coppard in Gindin 1985: 11; Liggins et al. 2011: 16). The short story has also been likened to poetry because of its richness (Gill 1995: 181) and its ‘rhythms, compression, imagery, motifs, patterning and concision’ (Mort 2009: 7). Coupled with Bayley’s contention that the short story is like a poem because it is ‘special and exclusive’ (1988: vii), which suggests interpretive and expressive freedom, the association between the short story and poetry should offer visual arts short story writers an opportunity to manipulate form and to compress expression, thus exploiting the short story’s characteristics.

2.5.3 The short story’s accent on the formal

Although we have seen that it is not always rewarding or wise to try to determine specific, identifying characteristics of the short story (or novella), it is nevertheless worth pursuing any pronounced concentration on the formal which could perhaps characterise these forms of literature, thus perhaps giving some substance to Bayley’s assertion that short story writers have become ‘conscious of [...] form’ (1988: vii). This is arguable if aimed exclusively at the short story: surely *all* writers are conscious of form in one way or another, even if they consciously downplay it. However, there are instances of formal idiosyncrasies in some short stories that briefly, but relatively insistently, float authorial technique to the surface, leaving it more intensely visible because its setting is small (see 2.5.2, above).

O’Faolain claims that a defining feature of the short story is the ‘abrupt opening’ and that the conventional ‘once-upon-a-time’ opening is displaced by ‘shorthand’ that reduces the preamble (all 1951: 150). This is presumably to

save space, although O’Faolain does not explain what openings are. They could be opening sentences or paragraphs, although it makes better intellectual sense to define them as scene-setters or curtain-raisers, and thus of varying length depending upon the work’s structure. In contemporary flash, or micro-fiction, some of the stories are so short that it is also hard to distinguish opener from main text at times. Hershman’s *I am a Camera* is only 158 words, divided almost exactly into two equal paragraphs (75 and 83 words respectively). Rourke sees as ‘a positive image and a negative’ (2011: 168), continuing the photographic metaphor of the story, which opens: “‘I am a camera,’ she whispered to herself in the shower, sliding her fingers along the rail already installed for the day when she wouldn’t be able to find her way out’ (2011: 167). At 32 words, this is nearly half the length of the first paragraph, the first half of the story. This opening cannot be separated from the action, is grammatically correct and unhurried, and chillingly presages what follows. The even pacing draws us right into the story (physically, in terms of lines consumed, as well as figuratively), with no way back. The sentence’s length might put us off pausing as we read or rereading it: it works as an extended opener, effectively embedding content and readers. It is not abrupt in a sense that O’Faolain might have envisaged, but it is efficient in a way he might have approved.

O’Faolain does not clarify either what he means by ‘abrupt’. It might be an opener that is brusque and staccato, with a sense of urgency such as in the opening sentence of Mansfield’s *Prelude*: ‘There was not an inch of room for Lottie and Kazia in the buggy’ (1962:11). All the words are short, everyday monosyllables apart from the slightly unusual names and the duosyllable ‘buggy’, which stamps an end to the sentence. Another good example of an opener without preamble – certainly without prehistory – is Belte’s online *Gathering Rosebuds of Rust*, which starts: ‘His reputation preceded him’ (2012: para 1). However, this calls on subsequent elucidation and is thus uneconomical in the sense with which we begin to understand the term here.

Not all short stories open abruptly. Mansfield’s *Revelations*, for example, starts expansively: ‘From eight o’clock in the morning until about half past eleven Monica Tyrell suffered from her nerves, and suffered so terribly that these hours were – agonizing, simply’. ‘Her’ might be cut without anyone doubting whose nerves were being discussed, although the word works hard by making Monica’s nerves a familiar, taunting illness – this is masterful technique. It seems perverse to follow ‘about’ – which is vague – with ‘half past eleven’ – which is precise. The extended precision of the time, however, makes Monica’s pain seem more acute. Note the powerful repeat of ‘suffered’: this opening is uncompromisingly explicit in that it prepares readers perfectly for the second sentence: ‘It was not as though she could control them [her nerves]’. This inability has already been clearly established in the opening sentence, with its unhurried early rhythm but disruptive, choppy ending; this second sentence excuses Monica for not doing more to help herself. Monica then reflects “‘perhaps if I were ten years younger...” she would say’ (all 1962: 205). ‘Would’ denotes Monica’s habitually repeated despair at what she cannot control: her ageing. The opening sentence may not be abrupt, but it has not been a waste either.

Mansfield’s *Je ne parle pas Français* opens much more abruptly: ‘I do not know why I have such a fancy for this little café’. This reads as if in the middle of a conversation, where the narrator is justifying a habit or whim; ‘such’ is

beguiling because we have not yet been told anything about the ‘fancy’; ‘this’ is specific but intriguing because we do not yet know which café is meant, nor whether we will be told. However, unlike *Revelations*, Mansfield has to go *backwards* here to explain the obliquity of her opener. Her second and third sentences read: ‘It’s dirty and sad, sad. It’s not as if it had anything to distinguish it from a hundred others – it hasn’t; or as if the same strange types came here every day, whom one could watch from one’s corner and recognize and more or less (with a strong accent on the less) get the hang of’ (all 1962: 63). These two sentences, with repeats, uneven lengths, unhurried pace and awkward ending, work hard to set the scene, as if compensating for the opening sentence: the repeat of ‘sad’ seems forced on Mansfield because she has been self-indulgently conversational in the opening sentence, and this repeat lacks the suffocating frenzy of the repeat of ‘suffered’ in *Revelations*. Because the opening sentence of *Je ne parle pas Français* is relatively uninformative, Mansfield evidently feels she needs to justify it, making her mark time with her second and third sentences. The opening sentence has not accelerated readers’ entry into this story. It is interesting to compare the lengths of these two stories: at 7 paperback pages, *Revelations* has little room to spare, and so an informative opening seems a sensible investment; at 32 pages, *Je ne parle pas Français* can afford the luxury of a less explicit opener better, as there is more of the story in which to explain it later.

Forster’s earlier *The Story of a Panic* (1954, 25 pages) begins: ‘Eustace’s career – if career it can be called – certainly dates from that afternoon in the chestnut woods above Ravello’. This alludes to previously discussed events (‘that afternoon’) but omits the character’s surname. This efficiently suggests an intimacy with – or patriarchal superiority over – the character from the outset. Forster’s second and third sentences change tone and pace, revealing a pompous narrator, but are both clear and unembroidered. Forster is grounding his opener to make the fantastical events that follow seem more convincing.

In Thomas Mann’s novella *Tristan*, Mann at first gives us Spinell’s catchphrase ‘How beautiful! [...] My God! Look, how beautiful!’, along with Spinell’s distinctive cocking of the head, as part of his characterization. Within half a page it is repeated, still in Mann’s authorial voice, but within six pages it recurs, this time in the novella’s real time as part of Spinell’s speech, and slightly changed: ‘To-day on my morning walk I saw a beautiful woman – good Lord! how beautiful she was!’, and within four pages of that it is repeated in Spinell’s speech again, and again slightly changed: ‘How beautiful! Good Lord! think of it, how beautiful!’. This device quickly and economically animates the character, and allows Mann to assert his authority as narrator: we can see that the characteristics he gives us are true, and that Spinell is all the more plausible as an autonomous character for the slight variations he himself brings to the phrase. Mann has already introduced Spinell as ‘a queer sort of man, with a name like some kind of mineral or precious stone’ and three pages later reminds us that Spinell was ‘a queer sort [...] with a name like some precious stone or other’ – but still has not told us his name (all 1955: 92, 98, 86, 89).

The repeat of the whole, slightly obscure description and the repeat of Spinell’s catchphrase, along with the slight but telling variations (Mann might be accused of wasting two precious words by the perhaps irrelevant, but rhythmically contributory, ‘she was’) make us all the more conscious of Mann’s concentration on the formal, and,

indeed, concentration is the key word: these uncommon repeats (for extended prose, as opposed to verse), creating poetic intonation and resonance, might well be difficult and wearisome to sustain over a much longer piece – even the two other Mann novellas in this edition, *Death in Venice* and *Tonio Kröger*, are 77 and 63 paperback pages respectively, *Tristan* just 44.

Other writers have exploited repeats with variations. In Joseph Jacobs's *Catskin*, a nineteenth-century version of *Cinderella*, the 25th line starts 'So she went along and went along and went along' (1999: 123), a pleasantly lilting and carefree repetition that emphasizes *Catskin*'s innocence (Figure 2.15). The repeats are a good example of fairy tales' concentration on form.³⁷ Nevertheless, the story is only three paperback pages long, around 120 lines, making approximately 1,400 words: the six repeated words ('...and went along and went along...') constitute 0.43% of the word count, a not inconsiderable amount in this context – the same technique in *Clarissa* would add around 3,000 words (a good size essay).

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Figure 2.15. *Catskin*: repeat phrase in mid-story (Tatar 1999: 123, my highlighter emphasis).

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Figure 2.16. *Catskin*: phrases repeated irregularly (Tatar 1999: 122, my highlighter emphasis).

Catskin repeats phrases beginning with 'well' (Figure 2.16); these are less intensively and less regularly paced than those in Figure 2.15. These repeats create subtly varying, comparative internal rhythms and pace, which can signal

³⁷ These make Vladimir Propp's formalist analysis of fairy tales (appended to Tatar's edition) seem more understandable.

characters' relative states of mind, dangers approaching and other complex facets of a story, perhaps echoing Mort's association of the short story with poetry (see above, 2.5.2). These contrivances are perhaps necessary in such a short text, where much has to be conveyed in a small space, but are perhaps less urgently necessary in novels: however, we have seen that caution must be exercised when ascribing characteristics to a story, irrespective of its actual length (2.5.2). Even more care needs to be exercised when ascribing any particular formal characteristics or techniques to authorial intent: this latter is evidently not always clear or obvious (and is minimised by reader-response anyway), and a short story does not have criteria in the same way that a student essay might, criteria which often dictate content, and thus, presumably, handling.

Hawthorn discusses Joyce's use of repetition and chiasmus in his short story *The Dead*, observing that although such techniques are not restricted to the short story, when used in the short story they often have to 'carry a heavier weight [...] to compensate for the limitations [of length]' (2001: 53). In *The Old Man and the Sea* Hemingway frequently repeats words: in the example (Figure 2.17) the conjunction 'nor' is repeated six times in the first sentence, representing 22% of the 27 words in this sentence. These conjunctions are masterfully bracketed by 'no' at the start of the sentence, the second word, and by 'now', the sixth word of the next sentence; this is also a three-letter word beginning with 'n', and this precise and abrupt inversion of negative into positive powerfully asserts the old man's new consciousness. It *could* also be argued that it inverts positive into negative – a good example of the short story's epigrammatic qualities creating plausible multiple meanings. Despite this possible inversion of meaning, there is still precision, echoing Flaubert's recommendation (also quoted by de Maupassant when discussing his own short story technique) that 'there is only one word to express [...] whatever you want to say [...] you must never be content with an approximation' (1971: 10-11).

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Figure 2.17. *The Old Man and the Sea*: repeat words and juxtapositions (Hemingway 2004: 16, my highlighter emphasis).

The typesetting in this modest trade paperback of the Hemingway story is carefully justified, with publishing-standard, acceptably consistent word-spacing, making the visual juxtaposition and layout of these three-letter words almost disingenuously artful, given that this is prose and not verse. There appears to be no contrivance beyond the author's, within this relatively traditional format, to emphasize these words, even when they appear vertically juxtaposed, or slightly offset as in the middle of the example, above.³⁸ This latter juxtaposition is a dilution, perhaps of the directly vertical juxtaposition on the left margin, but is a juxtaposition reinvigorated because it is re-emphasized by both these latter uses of 'nor' being followed by 'of', both these words helping to define a now insistent – and slightly increased – diagonal on the right. This is a good example of the interplay between form and

³⁸ An author will be able to ensure these juxtapositions happen, but to do so will have to check every edition and correct / write to fit: the juxtapositions will not *necessarily* happen of their own accord.

content that when visible appears to typify much of the short story genre. The old man used to dream of many things, but now, poignantly, of few things, and what he no longer dreams of is remorselessly listed here. In a longer novel, the technique may become intrusive if over-used, or may pass unnoticed if under-used. It is done here with adroitness and lightness of touch, and demonstrates a link of form and content, adumbrating intent. The author is able at once to claim and renounce responsibility for this, especially with regard to visual juxtapositions which are dependent as much upon external factors such as font choice, size and line length as they are upon authorial input. Figure 2.16 provides a clear example of this: the first phrase starting with ‘well’ neatly fills the whole of the first line, an effective piece of scene-setting but clearly not Jacobs’s late nineteenth-century doing, as this image is not reproduced from a facsimile edition but from Tatar’s 1999 edition.

2.5.4 Suggestion and subversion in the short story

Suggestion and implication are key conventions of the short story (Renshawe 1998: para. 11, Hawthorn quoting O’Faolain 2001: 50). O’Faolain recognises the space-saving advantages of suggestion, and claims that direct and explicit explanation is ‘heavy-handed’, less arresting than a ‘subtle hint’, and never ‘dilates the mind’ as implication does’ (all Hawthorn 2001: 50). Suggestion is therefore not just an authorial flourish to flatter the active reader: paradoxically, its function is to give the short story substance, which might therefore be reasonably argued as marginalising *active* reading. Hawthorn describes O’Faolain’s analysis of the opening line of Chekhov’s 1899 short story *The Lady with the Little Dog*: ‘It was reported that a new face had been seen on the quay; a lady with a little dog’. O’Faolain sees this sentence as an accomplished example of the short story’s suggestive shorthand. He deduces that the location is a port, but a resort and not docks (which a lady is unlikely to frequent); the weather is probably fine; the resort is small enough for the lady to arouse comment; and that there will be a man involved, sooner or later. O’Faolain adds that it would have been tedious to had to have been told that ‘at length’ (Hawthorn 2001: 50-51).³⁹ Proust might disagree (see above): the short story (as opposed to the short essay trialled in this study) should not be seen in terms of what it can say in less space than any longer story, but in terms of what it *does* say in its *own* space. Its formal integrity must be interrogated, and short story writers must not be commended purely

³⁹ The original story is in Russian, and translations naturally differ. O’Faolain does not disclose who translated the text he analyses (1951: 151). In Penguin’s ‘Great Loves’ edition, translated by Ronald Wilks, the opening sentence of the story reads: ‘People said that there was a new arrival on the Promenade: a lady with a little dog’ (2007: 95). There are three significant differences between these two versions. Wilks uses ‘people’ instead of the more impersonal ‘it was reported’, thus emphasising the gossipiness. Wilks himself then redresses the balance by using the more impersonal – but more specific in terms of creating a sense of physical presence – ‘new arrival’ instead of ‘new face’. However, Wilks’s use of ‘Promenade’ with an initial capital letter instead of ‘quay’ reveals the location to be quite grand, and perhaps more unequivocally a resort than in the version O’Faolain uses where he has only *inferred* a resort. There is also a suggestion that the resort might be a little faded and past its prime if a new arrival is so instantly remarkable. This study need not concern itself unduly with nuances of translation, but the important point is that because the story is relatively short (25 paperback pages, approx. 9,500 words) very small changes can make very big differences, especially where inference and suggestion play such key roles. There is an echo here of Flaubert’s exhortation never to be satisfied with an approximation, especially if the approximation reduces interpretative potential whereas the *mot juste* increases it.

for what they can say in less, but whether the less-said is worthwhile at all – and this same interplay between form, content and intent is surely relevant to visual arts practice.

The inferences (about the Chekhov) are imaginative and perceptive, adding texture, volume and weight. The sentence is economically written, with only two – straightforward – adjectives and enough gaps (Iser's 'blanks') for readers to make inroads: it does not waste space but licenses options instead. Bayley claims that 'the more native and autonomous the art, the more effectively it may arouse foreign and external speculation' (1988: 4): the more perfect the writing is on its own terms, the more likely it is to launch interpretive possibilities because it deflects criticism of, and distracting interest in, its own formal qualities.

Chekhov might have envisaged this kind of analysis and its outcome, but the risk is that he could not have guaranteed it. His safety-net for this risk was that the sentence works as a clear opener, suggestive potential or not. This offers visual arts writers a fall-back position, and sloughs off some responsibility to the reader. However, this is just one sentence: were the whole short essay to fall back onto statements of bare fact – because readers had not picked up on *any* suggestive potential – it would be of questionable quality. A parallel is *Twitterature*, a whimsical collection of 140-character maximum tweets summarising literature: Hamlet, for example, will become a 'happening youngster' (2009: 13). The tweets are not potentially rich sentences such as the Chekhov, but are reduced, economical summaries lacking the original form / content integrity. In addition, the tweets rely on readers having read the full-length versions: an example is 'Ach! Nobody told me St Petersburg was so cold. Good thing I have this trusty old coat' (2009: 19). This version of Gogol's 1842 *The Overcoat*, with 86 characters including punctuation and word spaces, may work as an off-beat prompt, provided one has already read the story, can remember the events and is prepared to overlook the tweet's omissions. It is important to distinguish between this format, in which a story is truncated by another author, and the short story proper in which the story is complete but can nonetheless prompt extra interpretative activity and embroidery by readers (which of course *all* literature does, for some readers, at different times, to different extents, in different places).

A better parallel to the Chekhov than the tweets would be six-word sagas such as Hemingway's 'For sale: baby shoes, never worn' (n.d.).⁴⁰ Leith sees the short form, especially such an extreme example as this, as nurturing 'incredible inventiveness' (2008: para. 9). He goes on to speculate that although the first reading of Hemingway's story is most likely to be tragic – a stillborn child – it could also be 'black-comic grotesque: a child is born without lower limbs', and thus its parents are being pragmatic. There could also be a prosaic reading: the shoes are an unwanted gift (all 2008: para. 12). These readings are given extra plausibility by the form – three pairs of words of similar length and register, controlled metre and taut punctuation. In their carefully unencumbered and well-constructed simplicity they offer equally valid readings because they do not favour one above the other (however closely they are read) and are conceived as full-length texts. In this way they are comparable to Cutting's vague language exposition of the man's routine day at work (2.4.3).

⁴⁰ The saga is attributed to Hemingway who supposedly wrote it to win a bet, but this is still not definitely proven.

O’Faolain believes that the short-story writer needs to combine ‘suggestion with compression’ (1951: 217). Cracknell claims that the short story involves ‘incredible compression and density, so every word doesn’t only count, it must multi-task’ (2011: 231). Coppard sees the short story as not simply ‘compressed or stripped-down [but] altogether different’; Bates sees it as an ‘effectively distilled novel’ (both Gindin 1985: 114). Given its size, the short story might promise less than the novel. Mort feels that the story’s shortness ‘meant that it could powerfully suggest, if not actually achieve, the complexity of a novel’ (2011: 8). Writers must adjust their techniques to compensate for sheer lack of physical content. O’Faolain implicitly criticises Henry James for applying novelistic technique to the short story when he argues that James’s outstanding weakness was that he did not accept that short stories cannot sustain ‘development of character [...] there is no time’ (1951: 191).

Bayley reminds us of reader-response when he states that ‘no one would wish to read [any] stories if each were intended to put a full-stop to curiosity’ (1988: 49); Hanson points out that the ‘imagination of readers is stirred [by the short story’s] elliptical structure’ (1989: 25); Trevor feels that short story writers ‘demand far more of the reader [than] with a novel, or television’ (Liggins *et al.* 2011: 15); Renshaw insists that getting readers to ‘ask a few unanswered questions can be part of a story’s resonance’ (1998: para. 9). Gindin records that although both Bates and Coppard explicitly denied using suggestion at times, ‘neither may have suppressed quite as much as he seemed to think he had’ (1985: 115), again highlighting the role of the reader in detecting suggested meaning, the steadfast powers of the short story to provide it, authors’ occasional disingenuity when disowning it, and authors’ occasional ignorance of its very existence.

The short story relies on readers’ active connivance - for Bayley, ‘another story begins to take shape as we read, or after we finish reading’ (1988: 179) and he points to ‘deeply located’ meaning (1988: 3); for Hershman, readers’ ability to read between the lines and to mine the buried meaning is ‘imperative’ (2011: 160). By the same token, the short story writer has to bury the meaning deeply in the first place so that readers experience the story as it unfolds and then complete it speculatively (Mort 2011: 9). This is classic reader-response, making readers part of the authoring process, turning suggestion into meaning.

The short story and flash fiction are considered by some to be modern and burgeoning (Hawthorn 2001: 48, Rourke 2011: 9). Some also claim it is subversive: Renshaw calls micro-fiction ‘defiant’, defying length, boundaries, and expectations (1998: para. 1); Rourke asserts that Marie de France’s mediaeval *Ysopet* fables were not meant to ‘stamp home some antiquated moral code’ (2011: 46). However, Rourke also traces the subversive ‘fabulist tradition’ (incorporating flash fiction) back to Aesop (2011: 9, 11), thus unsteady his claims for its modernity. Hanson claims the short story is ‘not quite respectable’ (1989: 1), the chosen form of the marginal and the exile (Hanson 1981: 2-3). Liggins *et al.* claim the short story can ‘cultivate diversity’ – implying that it generates broad relevance in a suggestive, indirect and inconclusive way (with the help of readers and reader-response); they claim it does this in an ‘uninhibited way’ (both 2011: 16), implying joyous liberation from the constraints of the novel.

Liggins *et al.* declare more explicitly that the short story breaks away from these constraints, ‘inviting experimentation and subversion’ (2011: 16), describing Saki’s stories as ‘quietly subversive attacks on the stuffiness and conventions of Edwardian England’ (2011: 11). Whilst this may be true, there is no reason why it should only be true of the short story.

Not all short stories subvert; not all novels conform. Mansfield’s and Spark’s short stories are accomplished and unsettling, but seem conventionally written when compared to Defoe’s 1722 *Moll Flanders*, which has inconsistent register, italics, capitals and punctuation in varying length paragraphs, each one a complete sentence (Figure 2.18); Sterne’s 1760-67 *Tristram Shandy* mixes poignant farce and time-shifts with proto-postmodern verve; Joyce’s 1922 *Ulysses* is a stream of consciousness; Woolf’s 1931 *The Waves* consists almost entirely of eerily static incantatory speech; and B. S. Johnson’s 1964 *Albert Angelo* experiments with page layout (Figure 2.19): these novels challenge what might be seen as novelistic conventions.

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Figure 2.18. (Left) *Moll Flanders*: a typical paragraph - this one occupies 2/3 of a page (Defoe 1998: 139).

Figure 2.19. (Right) *Albert Angelo*: unusual and challenging page layout for a novel (Johnson 1987: 88-89).

Miall claims the short story unsettles – but so does Zola’s 1867 novel *Thérèse Raquin*, profoundly; he claims that it points to an ‘alternative interpretation of reality’ (1989: 10) – but so does Cervantes’s enormous early seventeenth-century novel *Don Quixote*. Liggins *et al.* claim that Bowen cherished the short story for examining the ‘fragmentation and trauma of blitzed London’ (2011: 17) – Deighton’s 1972 novel *Bomber* also examines such WW2 themes, albeit in a different location. Clearly, these short story qualities are not inherently or exclusively subversive or modern. In addition, if subversion is seen as challenging the reader or genre norms, the novel could be argued to be the better form for doing this than the short story because the challenge will be more visible and more effective for being in a form apparently thought more traditional (and thus a less appropriate vehicle for such challenges): there is a role for the more traditional form as a contrast to highlight innovation, and this needs to be

borne in mind in the light of the discussion of risk (2.3) – a custom-made vehicle for challenge is already a safe option before even being driven.

The sonnet often plays with the ‘conventions established in previous sonnets’ (Furniss and Bath 1996: 283-284): if the link between the short story and poetry is accepted then the short essay’s relationship with the long essay could mirror that of the sonnet with its heritage. The short essay will have to break rules if it is to work in terms of a long essay (remembering that it is an essay with criteria, as opposed to a story – this does not necessarily preclude students from writing a story to answer the essay’s demands, but it does mean that with all forms absolute clarity of *relative* comparability is vital) and will thus create rules of its own. These rules are less likely to be as strictly laid down as those for long essays and dissertations simply because the short essay’s form will need to change more, depending on content and intent: the form and function will be as closely linked as they are in the short story, and will thus vary. By contrast long essays and dissertations ‘contribute to a scholarly dialogue already under way’; a thesis has to be ‘right’, existing ‘*for others*’ (all Watson 1987: 5-6, 3, emphasis in original). This reverses the emphasis, and can be taken to mean that in the long essay the writer conforms to a format, in the short essay the writer has to *find* the right format, and thus of course runs the risk of getting it wrong: wrong, that is, in terms of intent – a not unreasonable, embryonic metaphor for visual arts practice.

When he apparently paradoxically states that the ‘more complete the art, the more capable it is of arousing speculation’ (1988: 9), Bayley is claiming that a perfect blend of form and content deflects criticism and emasculates critical paradigms (see also the discussion of Cutting’s point about the man’s day at work, 2.4.3). It so completely satisfies readers of the base message – which in this case is ‘native and autonomous’ – that sophisticated readers’ curiosity should be aroused enough, in a reflexively progressive way, to believe that the ‘native and autonomous’ art must be almost disingenuous, a smokescreen for just the opposite meaning to the one originally signalled. There are no guarantees that the message *will* be read in the intended way: reader-response is deeply embedded, and thus individually implemented, with individual and unpredictable results: the risk here is that of reducing the numbers of understanding readers.

If the short story generally subverts, then when it does subvert it is only doing what is expected of it: it is thus conforming to norms, and is thus neither subversive nor risky. However, the short essay *might* be seen as both modern and subversive in an academic context when compared to the conventional long essay. Like the short story, the short essay will need to call on suggestion, gaps and silences, which are not traditionally valued in most academic writing, in my experience. However, such strategies are to boost content: in a well-intentioned attempt to make the short essay interesting and useful, replete with content, writers might inadvertently make the essay radical because it will most probably have to be innovative and suggestive; they make it risky because there are fewer existing norms to ensure correct – or indeed any – transfer of meaning (although one must remember that to use risk when it is on offer is not really risky – see 2.3). Thus writers are *forced* to take some kind of risk – and thus the risk itself is diminished, if *real* risk is in fact seen as stubbornly autonomous and not the natural consequence of security.

2.6 Conclusion

Writing has some claims to give HE visual arts courses credibility (2.2.2: e.g. Pevsner, cited in Borg (2007), and 1960s Coldstream Reports). Although QAA documentation itemises outcomes suitable for assessment by writing, it does not actually specify writing to do this (perhaps assuming institutions will incorporate writing assignments anyway, or that other modes of assessing such outcomes will be used). These particular QAA outcomes' connections to practice are only implicit, and alternative, more visual arts-coherent ways of articulating and connecting such outcomes *could* be considered. If so, it suggests that the credibility that writing was meant to provide, above, may have *already* been in place but not adequately activated, and that writing was the *wrong* answer – or at least *one* answer amongst others – to the issue. This might now give writing a freer, less exacting function.

UK HE visual arts writing assignments – in their traditional form, such as essays and dissertations, for example, and with their traditional dialectic agenda (the thesis / antithesis / synthesis model) *tend* to be recognisably similar in length, content and intent. Commentators disagree about the value of customised, visual arts writing: some, such as Wood (2011) celebrate it for embracing a new visual arts culture which he sees as outpacing traditional writing; others, such as Russell (2011), see the endorsement of such approaches as devaluing visual arts HE. These sharply divided views are perhaps because the forms, applicability and benefits of customised visual arts writing are not well defined, and also perhaps because more traditional writing is valued as a marker of quality in a climate of increasing scrutiny of art and design courses by students, parents and other stakeholders, given recent reviews such as Browne's (2010). In my experience many courses and educators gather feedback and use it to validate existing / proposed courses in a thoroughly laudable way. However, the student voice has not featured prominently – if at all – in the research I have encountered in this study. My own research has shown complex, layered and sometimes contradictory visual arts students' views on writing. Haggis (2003) cites disconnects between pre-existing academic expectations and student expectations: however, it could be argued that empowering students to bridge that gap is less patronising than removing it beforehand.⁴¹

Writing guides and support apps are well-intentioned, but concentrate largely on grammar and structure. They may not be intellectually rewarding to those seeking to align visual arts writing to practice, but may nonetheless be helpful and reassuring for visual arts students who respect writing basics and are perhaps unaware of *how* to connect

⁴¹ In a questionnaire I conducted with Coventry University Foundation students in November 2011, 41% of respondents (28 of 68) were enthusiastic about the prospects of a creative writing project that broke the rules of grammar and spelling, or was a piece of fiction; 47% (32 of 68) answered 'maybe' and 12% (8 of 68) were negative about such a creative writing project. The same questionnaire went on to ask if the prospect would be more appealing if it were linked 'in some way' to their art and design practice: 48.5% (33 of 68) answered 'yes', 44% (30 of 68) answered 'maybe', and 7.5% (5 of 68) answered 'no'. I was a little surprised at the hesitancy these results suggest, especially given that the incentive of linking the writing project to visual arts practice produced such a minute difference. There is no evidence to suggest that these students favoured more traditional writing as an alternative, although Foundation students *may* be more conservative than other HE students given that they are new to HE and thus *perhaps* more nervous about shrugging off familiar writing approaches. Nevertheless, the results show that it is unwise to make assumptions about students' inclinations and prejudices.

writing to practice (and / or *why* they might need to). Initiatives that recommend measuring visual arts writing by practice metrics instead of generic academic ones tend to avoid committing themselves to demonstrating how this measuring might be done. The research infers that these initiatives assume that improved discipline-specific critical writing will enhance the kinds of outcomes identified in course and QAA documentation, and that this will in turn improve practice: however, there is no direct route mapped out, and the inference may be true, it may not: it is not really measurable in any objective or reliable way. The pleasures of practice knowledge may be enriched and enhanced by critical writing, but whether this makes the practice better is questionable (because this is so hard to measure) unless critical awareness as a *discrete* extra is part of learning outcomes. Subject-specific writing material is recommended (Gillett, Hammond 2009) alongside a move away from writing's surface features and new ways of assessing / evaluating student writing and understanding. However, the question of whether student writing or student practical work will benefit is largely avoided, as is any confident declaration that any benefits to the former will also benefit the latter – any such omission leads one to suspect a tacit assumption that course structures will take care of that – or that *both* writing and practical work are, in fact, student practice: an imaginative and inclusive possibility that certainly needs pursuit.

Tonfoni's attempts to make writing 'visual' might be an answer, but she largely mimics visual arts practice instead of interpreting it. Her ideas of creativity are routine and general, with reductive notions about space and shape association: this undermines her thesis. There is a danger that her approach may end up being seen as an artwork and not as a piece of writing, and there are few connectors between these two in her ideas. This may, however, be a good thing, in Koestlerian terms, in that it could prompt a major bisociative effort, given the reassurances of domain boundaries. However, her work might reasonably be criticised for proscribing such potential because her binary stance could be seen as convincingly set out. This is because her visual material has formal integrity, and makes a convincing formal statement (see Figure 2.4, for example): however, I argue that this is not the statement she claims it to be because she claims to liberate whereas the above restricts. Formulating practice-specific writing is difficult; this perhaps explains why criticisms of traditional writing are largely unaccompanied by alternative suggestions. Tonfoni can be criticised for being prescriptive, and not offering students the chance to develop their own critical writing abilities in order to provide them with a chance to apply and expand their creativity (Beecher 2006).

Practitioners and educators value risk, although terminology is predictable and vague, and it follows that staff may share this vagueness. Risk is not defined in documentation, nor are examples provided, nor does any documentation or practitioner convincingly state *why* risk in any form is valued. It is not enough to declare that creativity explores the unknown: this is obvious, and needs disentangling (the Foundation Studies survey at Coventry University demonstrates this⁴²). Some practitioners and educators advocate failure as part of exploration; however, failure is

⁴² The same survey as in Footnote 41, above, found – in a multiple-choice question – that most of the students (75%, 51 of 68 respondents) felt that risk in practice was good because 'boundaries need pushing', yet the second most popular response (57.5%, 39 of 68 respondents) was that risk is 'what tutors want to see'. The third most popular response (42.5%, 29 of 68 respondents) was that risk is difficult because it is hard to know what it really is. 34% (23 of 68 respondents) felt that risk-taking was clever because it implied one had to know the rules before breaking them. However, this latter *can* be read therefore as a safe option, especially if sanctioned by tutors (which it generally is – see 2.3.2). 3% (2 of 68 respondents) felt that risk would get them bad grades, but the same number (although not necessarily the same respondents) also felt that risk-

probably an unattractive and élite option in the current climate, and this will only emphasise and consolidate the disjunction between exploration and the real thing: risk is the collateral victim. Some risks which failed might have succeeded had the risk been riskier: risk needs understanding and management. This uncovers a constant paradox in this study: as risk becomes better understood and managed, it becomes less risky.

Sketchbooks are implicit opportunities for risk, but their status can quarantine them from real risk. This prevents the interlocking central to Koestler's bisociative idea of creativity, and emphasises a safe – because unexplored – disjunction between the ideal and the real. Koestler argues that creativity needs '*intellectual illumination*', positing such creativity as the 'highest form of learning' because of the high improbability of its resolution (1976): the antithesis of the perhaps clichéd, romantic, blinding moment of perhaps anguished inspiration. However, I argue that Koestler's bisociation must not be seen as a miraculous guarantee that the plainly absurd, for example, will always be reconciled into something more meaningful and less plainly absurd (postmodern excesses notwithstanding) – see Tonfoni's near-binary stance, above. The practitioners describing their sketchbook work do not make explicit links between the ideal and the realised, although there is frequent mention of sketchbooks being a journey or a portal. However, this suggests a destination, and thus a reasonably well-trodden path to reach it which surely minimises risk. What might look daring and different in a sketchbook is what sketchbooks are expected to demonstrate. Despite QAA's, course planners' and practitioners' well-intentioned statements to the contrary, sketchbooks are thus essentially risk-free: one should be very wary of any confusion between absolutes of form and intent here. Risk is hard to quantify – Carson's *Ray Gun* spread runs four possible risks; comparing the Chapman Brothers to the Stuckists shows that risk can be usefully measured by attitude and context, as opposed to absolutes of form.

Rules and practice guidelines can confuse absolutes of form with the effects of form, and can be deceptively reductive – they can also be persuasive and authoritative, thus marginalising risk. Confident practitioners might see rules as a chance to subvert, and this highlights the difficulties of trying to identify or quantify risk: it offers different challenges to different minds. Domain boundaries can create a safety net, in which risks become self-referential, small-scale and irrelevant in broader contexts; it takes confidence, especially early in a career, to challenge familiar, robust and apparently coherent domain boundaries. The prevailing economic climate and the increasingly protective university environment could be a powerful risk-inhibitor by increasing dependency and decreasing autonomy, but *could*, by the same token, be seen as a better environment for *any* risk to flourish – at which point the risk is again devalued, and we will see this same phenomenon (that risk's ideal environment is elusive) recur when discussing the short story and the novel, and the short essay and its traditional counterpart the long(er) essay.

Reader-response values readers over authors as creators of meaning. Barthes (2001) and Fish (1980) minimise authorial contribution; Iser (1974, 1980) restores some agency to it; Fish introduces interpretive communities to offset the subjectivity that might result from affective criticism. Reader-response extends before and after its key

taking would disconnect the work from its audience – an intelligent caution. The survey did not ask if this caution meant that these students would avoid risk – it may be that they *would* take risks and were simply showing that they were aware of what risks risk might *really* involve.

1970s codification, giving it a durability that Harkin needs when she applies reader-response to all forms of creative endeavour. Huckin's textual silences deal with absences (2010), incomplete texts in which material is withheld intentionally or unintentionally. This may seem to be a variation on reader-response proper, which deals with complete texts; however, Huckin's texts *are* complete in that one reads what one is given:⁴³ this demonstrates how usefully pliant reader-response really is, and underscores Harkin's thesis (2005).

Reader-response may emphasise form because it makes writers aware of writing effects and how to change them. Reader-response can liberate writers from the constraints of conventional academic writing, offering creative challenges because the reader has to be included dynamically. This may undermine some of the reassuring subjectivity traditionally associated with Barthes's author,⁴⁴ and be risky because UK HE visual arts education traditionally emphasises the importance of the maker, and this extends into writing. Readers may misread text; writers may disengage if they feel readers have a large stake in interpretation because they may think readers will interpret what they want, irrespective of writers' intentions. Reader-response can compound unwelcome subjectivity – or any other failings of the text. The short essay's abdication of responsibility might reassure writers, but this is an unfamiliar position for the majority of student writers, and could be unnerving. Harkin (2005) warns that students' subjectivity may in fact be a safe haven for them: it could be argued then that it is now less risky than objectivity.

Vague language consists of imprecise terms; Channell (1994), Cutting (2007) and Evison *et al.* (2007) stress the importance of context and a community of shared knowledge to create clear and collaborative meaning. This suggests that a meta-meaning, not initially understood or envisaged by both parties, could emerge from a basic exchange. Thus vague language might not only communicate meaning but might *create* meaning. Furthermore, mismatches might still communicate, becoming common ground. Cook (2007) points out that interpretive freedom must be mixed with intelligent restraint and insight. This is partly to limit debate manageably and meaningfully, and partly so that the very notion of interpretive freedom is neither cheapened nor debased.

Vague language might accentuate the formal because it is a conscious re-working of language and can be adapted to fit, although that may affect meaning. Initialisms could be included, although they may skew visual balance which may be a key factor in an at-a-glance short essay: the essay becomes an object as much as a piece of writing. Vague language might offer opportunities for personal and innovative writing, and its contextual dependency opens it up to imaginative subversion. It can be mixed with more formal registers to create patterned and layered text. Students might think it too safe, easy and / or patronising, and thus *not* a creative challenge. It may seem risky because it is not used much in academic writing; it might be more prominent in a short essay, but the short essay's radical form itself risks cancelling out vague language's radicalism, thus making vague language more effective in a long essay. Vague language risks becoming tiresome if overplayed in a long essay, however, and this might discolour the

⁴³ Textual errors and spelling mistakes are an interesting grey area here, but outside the province of this study.

⁴⁴ There is evidence that reader-response and associated literary theories can be extended into practice – see 'Blah Blah Blahnik' (Appendix 7).

concept behind its implementation. Thus length – size – of an essay and its form *are* related; a relationship to bolster the relationship between form and content and as we will see, intent.

Advocates of vague language (e.g. Evison *et al.* 2007) claim that it is creative, but we have seen that creativity in writing is not liked by all visual arts students; furthermore, what is meant by creativity here is open to debate: if it just means using something out of context then it is not terribly demanding. Vague language's claims to shortness are also debatable – some vague language *adds* text: sometimes as a clarifier, sometimes not, sometimes as an appeal to collaboration ('you know'), and thus its truly vague credentials should be questioned. In addition Cook and Channell, in particular, might be accused of over-simplifying vague language's appeal, agency and influence, Channell making assumptions about vague language's possible meanings which are themselves undermined by vague language's own tenets: a true conundrum which might either be seen as a criticism (of Channell and vague language), or as a generous licencing on her part of vague language to be taken on and augmented by the next user/s.

Provisional meaning can handle sensitive material, and can suggest new and various interpretive stances for unfamiliar or complex material; it can prolong the life of a work. The risk with provisional meaning is that readers may not understand *any* of the meanings on offer, or may misunderstand any or all of them, or may *think* they understand them: this latter is what reader-response proponents want, of course, but it takes a confident writer to be tolerant of such potentially off-message responses. A crude, unambiguous meaning is at least right for some of the time, and its lack of meta-effect – should it need it – is the risk it runs. Reader-response may be a refuge here, however, offering imprecise statements the sanctuary of a friendly theoretical framework – precise meaning might in fact thus be riskier than imprecise meaning (see Harkin, above, regarding objectivity and subjectivity), reminding us that we are in a minefield. Risk and provisional meaning are tightly entwined: to separate them risks disabling them.

There is little consensus over the length of the short story, and this may connect with the exploration of plasticity inherent in visual arts practice. The analysis of short story openings shows mixed techniques, with interpretations of 'abrupt', for example, being productively arguable. The analysis of short story repeats shows that restrictions of size should not mean reductive restrictions of content – visual arts students' work is dogged and characterised by restrictions: extent, scale, cost, time, material, for example. The analysis also connects the repeats to Iser's 'blanks' (1980) and thus connects this analysis and these short story features to reader-response.

Suggestion is seen as artful and necessary for the short story to avoid seeming simplistic and empty. Short stories also need to compress, making reader-response a key theoretical framework. O'Faolain's readers have work to do because they need to be 'quick on the uptake' if they are to 'dive into the narrative without any explanations, preambles, elaborate introductions, apologies or other notations as to place, time or occasion' (1951). The short story is often thought subversive, both in terms of its formal handling and its content, although it is not generally explained *why* this might be. The evidence shows that some novels can equally be subversive and some short stories compliant: the short story has no monopoly on subversion. This is particularly important because it reminds us again

to be wary of absolutes of form, and that form can be a refuge (as we have seen with sketchbooks) which can discourage – if not nullify – risk. Because the novel (reputedly) has fewer expectations than the short story as a carrier of risk, it may in fact be that it carries risk *better* than the short story, although formal considerations of repetitiousness, obscurity and gimmickry are equally important in *both* formats. The short story must be judged as a short story, and not as some radical reworking of a novel: this is *precisely* the point of comparing six-word sagas with tweets (2.5.4). Short essays must also be judged as short essays because given the preponderance of the long essay the short essay will probably *always* seem interestingly radical by comparison, and this alone should not bestow it with integrity or credit.

The research shows that writing is a good thing, valued for its transferable skills and cognitive prowess, that there is help available for grammar and other writing basics, and that students and stakeholders value and respect proper, traditional writing. There are initiatives aimed at making writing seem more relevant to visual arts practice, and there are case studies of visual writing. The research found no clear link between writing and practice beyond alternative ways of reinforcing the chain linking QAA at one end and practice at the other. This is a cumbersome process, and like any chain only as strong as its weakest link. There is no tangible evidence in this research that writing directly enhances visual arts practice in any way at all. Risk is valued, but research shows that nobody convincingly says why, nor what it should be, nor how it differs from exploration and experimentation, nor what to do once risk has been taken, nor how risk boosts creativity: this of course may be because definitions of creativity are so varied, ranging from the near-metaphysical to the near-mundane. Provisional meaning can be an ally, but it can be erratic and of course it eludes firm meaning. Research shows that specific forms of provisional meaning such as vague language have plastic form which may solidify meaning rather than liquefy it. Furthermore, some of vague language's claims are questionable and under-developed, and its notions of creativity artless. Research shows that the short story has exciting potential for delimitation, and favours formal enterprise. It works with suggestion and some say it is subversive, although, as with vague language, claims of its radical anti-institutionalism (in the broadest sense) should be tempered by awareness that that can be seen as part of its nature, and thus neither especially radical or risky: it is expected. Crucially, the short story has been taken up by contemporary media, featuring on the internet and in micro-fiction formats, and coinciding with a rise in interest in the short fable: these give the short story a plasticity that *might* happily marry 'proper' writing and the short essay, and, by virtue of this resultant hybridity, perhaps enable the short essay to capitalise on – and promote – risk's unpredictability.

Three research questions emerge from this literature review. These are:

RQ1 – How do insights gained from the analysis of the short story aid the setting and assessment of writing tasks in visual arts?

RQ2 – Do short essays encourage the kind of risk-taking that we wish to foster in visual arts students?

RQ3 – What benefits for future practice can be gained through the writing of short essays that cannot be gained through the writing of long essays?

Chapter 3

The short story in visual arts practice

3.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses how visual arts practice can demonstrate risk-taking as embodied in short story characteristics of reader-involvement, provisional meaning, concentration on form (with particular reference to openings and repeats), suggestion and subversion as analysed in the literature review. The examples represent a range of visual arts practice: they do not exemplify unifying themes. Not all the examples demonstrate the short story characteristics to the same degree:⁴⁵ the chapter does not present each example as exemplifying each characteristic. The chapter does not aim, therefore, to define creativity around these characteristics, but to show instead that the connection between short story characteristics and visual arts practice is not fanciful, and that the notion of risk in the short story is transferable to visual arts practice.

3.2 The short story in visual arts practice

In Figure 3.1, an anxious-looking young woman might be considering future responsibilities and uncertainties as she appears to hesitate between the reassuringly sunlit, pastoral landscape (which could symbolize peace, safety and resolution of life's problems) and the dark background. The background encourages us to focus on the sitter's face straightaway: O'Faolain's abrupt and uncluttered opening, translating a short story characteristic into visual terms. Yet she seems to ask us – and herself – if she is doing the right thing. Perhaps she is contemplating marriage, or joining a convent: the untextured darkness behind her has only left a sliver of civilization to look forward to. She might equally have already retreated from life's succour (represented by the landscape) into a life of bleak seclusion (represented by the dark background): this might have been forced on her by recent widowhood. We do not know – the painting suggests alternative, plausible meanings, despite a tight and uncompromising composition. This formal perfection validates interpretive options because it does not favour one over the other, a good model for Bayley's contention that the more complete the art the more meanings it throws up (1988: 9) and reminiscent of Cutting's example of the man's uneventful day (2.4.3) and six-word sagas (2.5.4).

⁴⁵ Some visual arts practice might be argued as not demonstrating any of these characteristics at all: it is not this study's province to argue the existence of these characteristics exhaustively because that would distort its purpose.

The painting is balanced by the distribution of light and dark and the relative scale of component parts, holding the figure perfectly in the composition. The painting is small (39 x 32 cms), and although this reduces the physical space for expressive potential, a scaled-up version may seem crudely monolithic. The relationship between the plain dark background and the thin figurative vertical slice, a ratio of about 4:1, is extravagant, daring and risky because so little is openly represented. The painting's composition can thus be compared to the short story's repeats: both seem perverse, given space restrictions, and echo Bank's description of Mansfield's plot handling as 'contrived' (1985: 64).

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Figure 3.1. *Portrait of a Young Woman*, c. 1500-1509, attributed to Domenico Panetti (Museo Capitolini, Pinacoteca, Sala II, Rome).

In Figure 3.2 'both' is used 12 times (11%) out of the 107 words total. The 12 repeats occur roughly once every 10 words, a nearly symmetrical procession. The fable-like wording ('the Grandfather had but two Sons', 'the one a Knight, the other a Captain', reminiscent of *Catskin*, literature review, 2.5.3), coupled with the satisfying rhythm (it is all one sentence), give the plaque a considered, memorable and personal feel, more like narrative verse than a cathedral plaque. It could be considered flawed, because of its repeats, but it could equally have been written down verbatim during an interview and then incised, making it faithful and skilful. It might suggest inevitability behind the family history, perhaps a resignation to fate, perhaps a delight in coincidence. Hershman is clear that flash fiction has no rules, 'no prohibitions on style, content, pace, setting, point of view, linear or non-linear narrative' (2011: 164). This should be taken to licence the repeats because her insistence that such short text writing should have 'no comma, no space, no paragraph break [...] thoughtlessly entered' (2011: 159) does not prohibit repeats: it simply requires that they be carefully and knowingly used. Although she agrees that 'paring down' a story and removing repetition is good practice, she also accepts that any writer 'skimping' might bring unwelcome hints of cheap, unthinking economy, shutting out 'rich' prose (2011: 162). The unencumbered precision valued by Hershman and others must not be measured mechanistically by length alone. If repeats and swollen sentences are used coherently, then the work achieves integrity, whatever the interpretive stance of the reader.

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Figure 3.2. Winchester Cathedral: seventeenth-century plaque (2012: photo by Simon Bell).

The printing ink label (Figure 3.3) implies that the tin contains printing ink, but does not state this (although the shape of the tin and its context of use will). It suggests that the ink handles the challenge of four-colour process printing routinely and confidently by repeating the name four times; it gambles by printing a difficult, repeated reversed out image which needs precise register, even presswork and good ink, thus exemplifying what it can do without stating it (and providing a quasi-escape were the printing to be sub-standard: the pattern can also be read, and excused, as a decorative device); and it combines a hard-edged panel with softer, rounded shapes thus licensing different interpretations of what business-efficient graphics could be. Hanson sees readers' imagination being stirred by elliptical structure (1989: 25); in this case, an elaborate performance by the ink is suggested, whilst the possible ridicule of making something as everyday as ink seem inappropriately grandiose is avoided: readers take responsibility for *that* degree of exaggeration.

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Figure 3.3. Manders printing ink label (2012: photo by Simon Bell).

Graham Rawle's *Woman's World* (Figure 3.4) is composed entirely of letters, words, numerals and sentences taken from existing women's magazines and re-pasted to make new words, phrases and sentences. The book concerns a 'perfect woman's world' (2006: back cover), although micro-contexts are not unequivocal, i.e. the words will have debatable meta-meanings because of the suggestive potential of their varied typographic and contextual associations.

The form of the words is forced on Rawle by his concept, and this is a good example of disingenuous authorial abdication, like the juxtaposed repeats of words in *The Old Man and the Sea* and *Catskin* (see 2.5.3). The ‘play of language’ that Hanson sees the short story writer courting (1989: 24), echoing Oates’s technique – ‘Norma Jean hadn’t told Gladys good news of her life and career for some time, reasoning *Maybe it isn’t true exactly?*’ (2001: 297, emphasis in original), in which italicised thoughts unceremoniously juxtapose roman narrative and prompt readers to acknowledge different registers, is also exemplified in Rawle’s handling of folios. The verso is a cardinal combining words and numbers, the recto a numerical ordinal; both mix fonts and shapes.

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Figure 3.4. *Woman’s World: a graphic novel* (Rawle 2006: 282-83).

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Figure 5. (Left) *Woman’s World: a graphic novel* (Rawle 2006: 125).

Figure 3.6. (Right) *Bible* (Doves Press 1903-05: 27).

Rawle's section opening (Figure 3.5) is a witty homage to older and more conventional openings such as the Doves Press *Bible* (Figure 3.6), matching the latter's full-page initial letter and capitalised text. In this way, Rawle echoes O'Faolain's recommendation that openings be abrupt shorthand; Rawle's opening certainly punctuates the gap between sections abruptly, and is shorthand by connecting intelligently and quickly with biblical and book conventions: opportunities which it gently parodies. Rawle can disclaim responsibility for associated meaning because he is governed by what *already* exists. He might have composed the words out of individual letters in a font he might have deemed more appropriate, but that might limit interpretive potential by throwing much greater scrutiny back onto *his* choices. By being consistently inconsistent in his use of font, he makes the work physically manageable (the task would be monstrous if it were to be done letter-by-letter); he creates a formally perfect artefact because it licenses expressive variations; and he throws interpretive responsibility back onto the reader.

Tank magazine's fifth anniversary 'landmark' edition perhaps takes reader involvement to an extreme – there are no images at all (apart from on the cover). The inside of the magazine is conventional apart from outline rectangles replacing all the images, and a description of what the images would be (Figure 3.7). The magazine's editorial describes itself as a place for 'experimentation', and calmly criticises today's culture of image literacy as sometimes politely describing *illiteracy* (all 2003: inside front cover, my emphasis). Debatable though this may be, the magazine's unusual stance is clearly risky because it abandons its usual format and intelligently flatters its readers (who may miss the point and / or become alienated). This chimes with the short story's 'disjunction, inconclusiveness, obliquity [and] ideological marginality' (Hanson 1989: 6): the magazine has placed itself out on a limb. However, if readers like it, then, like the Carson *Ray Gun* spread (see 2.3.3), it might become standard practice for the magazine and thus no longer risky.

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Figure 3.7. Photos replaced by descriptive text (*Tank* 2003: 9).

The magazine's stance also chimes with Iser's views on reader-response, in which he cites philosopher Dugald Stewart discussing painting in 1792: 'imitation, therefore, is not the end [...] but the means [...] if the imitation be carried so far as to preclude all exercise of the spectator's imagination, it will disappoint [...] the purpose of the artist...It is [...] almost certain, that the imaginations of no two men coincide upon such occasions; and [...] the pictures by which they are produced are more or less happily imagined' (Folkenflik 2006: 685). Iser endorses Stewart's argument that the spectator is stimulated by omission which encourages different interpretations from different spectators' imaginations (1980: 11). *Tank* risks opprobrium for its experiment, but the magazine is issued quarterly, and this turnover makes the experiment less permanent. In this way it resembles the short story, whose small size can also make an experiment seem less permanent – but not necessarily more significant – than it might in a novel.

When Bayley claims that the short story mixes 'sophistication with sensationalism' (1988: viii), he could be arguing, for instance, that the short story crafts a crude message well (not unlike the ink label, above), creating layered meaning as *The Sun* does (Figure 3.8) in this celebrated front page. The main-heading 'GOTCHA', a single word

contracted from two, is a good example of vague language's colloquial free form: effectively shoe-horned into a gap, it creates a mood of jubilant aggression which is made more chilling by the confident lack of exclamation mark. The layout is tight, and the evenly narrowing sub-heading lines funnel the reader into the main body of text. The main heading's tight spacing contrasts with the sub-heading's large and gaping spaces (perhaps deliberately echoing the state of the 'General Belgrano' after it was hit), making one read the words in a staccato, unpolished way and adding to the sense of clamorous drama. The text could have been rewritten to make a tighter layout, but this *is* tight already, given the reading mode and interpretation of the spacing suggested above. This page is a good example of authorial⁴⁶ disingenuity, mixing sophistication with sensationalism. Bayley may mean sensationalism to be graphic crudeness in a short story which needs sophisticated readers to analyse and appreciate how the story turns sensationalism into something more engaging, profound and demanding. The sensationalism might sometimes just be pure sensationalism, or even deft self-parody – and it needs sophisticated readers not to fall into the trap of over-, under- or otherwise mis-reading the potential meaning/s. The balanced register between the speed of reading, the main heading and the loose layout could be claimed to give the page enough formal resolution and integrity to allow it to function were the suggestive dimension missed by some readers. It may also help to create a potentially bigger readership by broadening appeal via interpretive depth.

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Figure 3.8. Newspaper reporting the Argentine cruiser 'General Belgrano' hit by the Royal Navy during the Falklands War (*The Sun* 1982: front page).

⁴⁶ 'Authorial' in this context is taken to include copy-writing, editorial and design activities. This is an important point, given the type of engagement expected of the students in this study's experiment (see Chapter 4).

3.3 Conclusion

The painting's handling is risky, as the expansive background might be thought to waste the space for more figurative content. The cathedral inscription also risks omitting content by its repeats – however, both examples have formal integrity of handling, which in both examples makes the meaning provisional: there is a deft balance, making alternative meanings possible and making a single, exclusive meaning and / or criticism for lack of same indefensible. The ink risks ridicule were bad printing to spoil its virtuoso demonstration; the provisional meaning created by the patterning prevents this risk from being recognised as a fault by all readers, as not all readers will connect the design with the suggested meaning. Even if some readers were to make the connection, doubt might creep into their minds because the suggestion is subtle, if insistent. The formal handling has the same integrity as the painting and the inscription: it is adroitly done and can also work on its own without needing interpretive potential to bolster it.

Rawle's apparently random arrangement of typographic *objets trouvés* risks overwhelming and alienating readers if they dislike his approach. *Woman's World's* meaning is provisional because it creates associative potential: readers do not have to be typographers to be able to distinguish between the various moods and effects of the different types because these types are taken from women's magazines in the first place. Rawle is thus building on readers' various experiences and expectations. Hanson thinks that formal resolution in the short story is created by a 'frame', an aesthetic device [which encourages] gaps and absences' (reminiscent of Iser's 'blanks'), which in turn seem ordered and not incongruous because of the frame's control (all 1989: 25). *Woman's World* embodies this frame, stratifying reading levels like *The Sun*, above. The associative power of Rawle's font and layout choices mean readers can explore interpretive territory as they wish; they can also read the book at face value, interpreting the book as they might interpret conventional literature; they can also read it deeply or superficially at the same time. The book's premise – that meaning can be created from pre-existing texts and amplified with readers' connivance – connects with reader-response's subversion of authorial autonomy.

Similarly, *Tank* risks alienating its readers if they fail to appreciate the magazine's concept. *Tank's* provisional meaning should in theory engage many readers because of its lack of definite meaning; it might equally do the opposite. It is a quarterly, so the risk is diminished over time; however, the issue may equally set a precedent and increase reader expectation of future innovations – this is hard to sustain indefinitely and the magazine thus also risks slipping into a wearisome routine of intrusive gimmickry. Risk can be very short-lived once it takes on definitive plastic form. The magazine's meaning is of course provisional; however, without images, and with such outline text, the meaning is also reduced. This makes it not unlike *Twitterature*, a reduced summary of content as opposed to a genuine short story with the formal integrity to suggest alternative meanings.

The Sun risks very little: its front page uses expected and largely tolerated colloquial, vague language to save space but also to set up a united community of readers who might all blame the Argentines. Readers are stratified: it is not

fanciful to suggest that the newspaper entrepreneurially uses self-parody to distinguish between those readers who believe wholeheartedly in the message (and buy the newspaper anyway), and those who do not (but still buy the newspaper in appalled fascination). However, *The Sun* has set a precedent and, like *Tank*, might risk being unable to sustain it. The layout is very tight, with a connection between the way the sub-heading in particular is read and the overall intent of the piece. The tightness might ease problems with future editions: the layout can be an excuse for weak puns.

These examples have been analysed as they might in any studio critique. The risks vary in type and scale relative to formal handling, reader involvement and expectation, and to provisional meaning. In all cases, the risk is characterised by an abdication, whether it be of direct statement, of specific meaning or clearly defined formal handling. The risks are that the artefact is devalued (the painting and the inscription); that it seems absurd (the ink); that it might alienate readers (the book and the magazine); and that it sets an unsustainable precedent (the magazine and the newspaper). Short story characteristics of reader-involvement, provisional meaning, concentration on form, suggestion and subversion have been imaginatively rephrased into these examples of visual arts practice. They have become metaphors for such practice and do not mimic or analyse them – it is a question of what the characteristics *do*, not what they are *like*. The possibility of the 128-word short essays in the study's experiment also becoming imaginatively rephrased into metaphors for visual arts practice will be further pursued in the study's Conclusion.

Chapter 4

The short essay in action

4.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the cohort and the experiment, discusses the essay and the presentation, explains the rationale, explores the intellectual and theoretical underpinning of the methodology, analyses the findings and evaluates the grades' data. The chapter has five main parts: Introduction (4.1), Methodology (4.2), Essays (4.3), Presentations (4.4) and Conclusion (4.5). For each student, the experiment consisted of an essay followed by a presentation. There were two essay formats: the 128-word version (the subject of the experiment) and the 1,000-word version (the control group's version). Both essay formats had the same brief, subject and topics, and were distributed as equally as possible across the cohort. All students had the same presentation brief. I wrote the briefs, conducted the seminars, wrote formative feedback to drafts, wrote support material published on Moodle (Coventry University's intranet VLE), and graded the essays and presentations with moderating staff.

The experiment took place in Coventry University's School of Art and Design in November / December 2011. The students were from the University's Foundation Diploma in Art and Design, which is a pre-undergraduate, FE (Further Education⁴⁷), one-year, diagnostic course. Covering fashion, fine art, illustration, photography, automotive design, product design, interior design and graphics, it is intended as a 'preparatory experience for students wishing to gain access to studio-based Art and Design programmes at HND or BA level within the UK and beyond' (Coventry University, 2011). The majority are post-school home students but there are also some overseas and some mature students. There were three reasons for choosing Foundation students:

1. The breadth of the course and students' interests might offer more fruitful data;
2. The timing was good as the experiment launch coincided with a new studio project, creating as clear a context as possible. Given that 'concentration cannot be achieved at will' (Gibbs and Habeshaw 1989: 180), it was important that any potential distractions were minimised and students' efforts maximised;
3. Although the experiment was graded, the grades did not directly affect any coursework: however, students were advised that the work needed to be in their portfolios as part of their overall, end-of-year submission. This gave me a useful platform for the experiment: important but not inhibiting.

Additionally, any noticeable discrepancies between experiment's subject and control group experience would have minimal impact.

⁴⁷ Although not technically HE, Foundation students at Coventry University are taught in an HE environment, often by staff from BA and / or MA courses, in order to help facilitate a smooth transition to undergraduate courses. Apart from being conscious of the diagnostic nature of Foundation and its consequent discipline-identity concerns, I make little differentiation between Foundation and level 1 students in my teaching, especially as many of my undergraduates have not done a Foundation course.

4.2 Methodology

The setting of the essays and the subsequent practice-based presentations might be considered action research, ethnography, participant observation or simply an experiment. Ethnographic research and participant observation are over-arching terms, arguably encompassing many of the specifics of action research as set out below, and ‘experiment’ is perhaps a seemingly useful and innocently inclusive, practical, catch-all term despite actually being laden with particular meanings and precise definitions. The exposition of and rationales behind the methodology are indebted to two seminal texts: those of Bryman (2004) and Cohen *et al.* (2007). These are frequently and justifiably posited as hugely authoritative and influential. In my experience here, they largely overlap although Bryman’s text is more accessibly set out (with very helpful chapter summaries) than the extremely comprehensive work of Cohen *et al.* I have used these two sources interchangeably, and nothing should be read into any apparent preference of my use of one over the other in this study.

‘Ethnography and participant observation entail the extended involvement of the researcher in the social life of those he or she studies’ (Bryman 2004: 291), and clearly this was not the case in my study: my ‘extended involvement’ was as my students’ tutor, and not their researcher – ‘social life’ can be taken to mean the university context. Bryman concedes that it is hard to distinguish between ethnography and participant observation, and that ethnography is sometimes preferred to participant observation because the latter can imply just passive observation, although in fact can mean data collected through interviews, documents, and a ‘wide range of methods’. This is vague enough to apply to my methods, although its putative blandness lacks the engaging specificity of ‘experiment’. ‘Experiment’ has the bonus connotation that it might go wrong: the presence of a provable hypothesis, typical in positivist approaches (Cohen *et al.* 2007: 173), is more implicit in the rubric of an experiment than it is in that of ethnography, participant observation or action research. Indeed, there are suggestions that because of naturalistic and qualitative research’s ‘reluctance to enter the hypothetico-deductive paradigm’ (Cohen *et al.* 2007: 173) it is ‘impossible to predetermine hypotheses [...] as prior knowledge cannot be presumed’ (Meinefeld, Whyte cited in Cohen *et al.* 2007: 173). This view can be taken to an extreme, in which there are suggestions that prior reading presumes predetermination (Glaser and Strauss, cited in Cohen *et al.* 2007: 173). Cohen *et al.* plead for sensible balance here, arguing that whilst initial hypotheses ‘may not be foregrounded in qualitative research’, they have their uses; they also reveal that Glaser and Strauss had used their own prior knowledge (2007: 173).

Bryman adds that ethnography can also be taken to have a ‘specific focus on the culture’ of the group/s in which the researcher is interested (all 2004: 292, 542), and if ‘culture’ were to be understood as the educational context of my students, then this would obviously apply to my study. Cohen *et al.* warn that to understand any situation, researchers need to understand context (2007: 167), which could be wryly seen as obvious (although context is a bigger and perhaps more delphic picture). Context can be changeable and prone to spread uncontrollably: it is thus unreliable and hard to understand – a difficult and perhaps unwise precept for a pre-condition. Cohen *et al.* also cite LeCompte and Preissle’s suggestion that ‘ethnographic approaches are concerned more with description rather than prediction, induction rather than deduction, generation rather than verification of theory,

construction rather than enumeration, and subjective rather than objective knowledge' (2007: 169), and there are many similarities with my project in these concerns, especially given that I claim to induce some supporting theory in my conclusions. However useful these concerns are as over-arching generalities, they could nonetheless be construed as lacking the specifics of some conceptualizations of action research.

My study's project conforms to the following characteristics and principles of action research (with my explanations in brackets):

- It is 'undertaken directly *in situ*'
(Familiar and usual University facilities);
- It 'seeks to understand the processes of change'
(The extent to which – if at all – and in what way or ways, the essays connect to or affect practice, this latter being the presentation);
- It 'is undertaken within an agreed framework of ethics'
(Ethical clearance sought and received well before any work done with students);
- It 'seeks to improve the quality of human actions'
(Writing was not implemented because I might have thought it 'a good thing' in a disconnected, abstract way but because my over-riding intention is to improve students' practice in some way if possible, and in this study writing was proposed as a driver of this);
- It 'focuses on those problems that are of immediate concern to practitioners'
(It is not clear if this means research practitioners or student visual arts practitioners – either way, improving student work and enhancing their experience of it are of immediate concern, as are the contextual issues surrounding and in some cases (as we have seen with risk) diminishing, student creativity and / or experimentation);
- It includes 'evaluation and reflection'
(The work was evaluated and assessed; interviews, questionnaires and drafts provided material of more profound and elusive metrics which called for reflective insights from all parties);
- It 'is methodologically eclectic'
(The study has characteristics of action research, evaluation research and experiments)
- It 'strives to render the research usable and shareable by participants'
(In some cases there is evidence that students have applied and adapted the short essay experience to aspects of their practice – such as sketchbook annotation and personal statements – in addition to the presentations in this study; I have used the short essay profitably in final year dissertations; colleagues have shown an interest in using it (in their own, customised form) in their own teaching / practice);
- It 'has a critical purpose in some forms'
(Improvement / enhancement is hoped for: the experience of writing such a short essay when a long one is generally the norm is clearly going to be seen as different, and thus this experience alone is not what is under scrutiny, nor is its novelty value alone celebrated);
- It 'strives to be emancipatory'
(The essays allowed choice of subject matter; the control group's essay was in a familiar format; the short essay needed no technical expertise; the setting-up and conditions of all aspects of the essays and

the presentations were as neutral as possible, in order to minimise distractions and to focus on the critical issues).

These defining principles and characteristics (all from Hult and Lennung, and McKernan, cited in Cohen *et al.* 2007: 299), incline the study towards action research.

However, there are some action research defining principles and characteristics, listed in the same source, which the study does *not* share. The study is not collaborative (apart from assessment moderation, which should be routine practice in HE and not singled out as an example of collaborative practice); it does not use data feedback in an 'ongoing cyclical process' (any subsequent iterations or implementation of the short essay will not be analyzed in terms of contributing to *this* study); it does not seek to 'understand particular complex social situations'; any specificity or idiosyncrasy which might make it an eccentric case study is intentionally minimized by the neutrality and familiarity of the study's intellectual and organizational context – the study aims for usable by-products; it does not avoid isolating and controlling variables; it is not formative in that the problem, aims and methodology do not change during its implementation; it cannot claim to contribute to a 'science of education'; it is not particularly dialogical nor does it particularly celebrate discourse, except perhaps in the drafts and the interviews (all as above, cited in Cohen *et al.* 2007: 299).

Given these conflicting claims, it is not surprising to find Bryman conceding that there is no 'single type of action research' (2004: 277). He defines action research briskly as an 'approach in which the action researcher and a client collaborate in the diagnosis of a problem and in the development of a solution based on the diagnosis' (2004: 537). However, this over-pathologises the situation in my study: I have not set out to remedy a particular or acute problem – visual arts students can clearly write with varying degrees of success and satisfaction; their practice is not in crisis. I am seeking a productive impact of writing on practice and its execution, which may enrich the experience of some – but not necessarily all – visual arts students in my study without compromising their existing progress in the process. I hypothesise that very short, tightly-structured essays will foster risk by combining radical format, content demand and writing's esteem. Bryman warns against confusing action research with evaluation research, which he sees as studying the 'impact of an intervention' (2004: 277). The setting of the essays and the subsequent presentations did have an intervention – the short essay, whose impact was measured – with a control group in which a nearly equal number of randomly picked students were asked to do a more conventional essay. Bryman sees the use of control as typifying evaluation research; he considers that although researchers may disagree about how evaluation research should be carried out, their views would 'typically coalesce around a recognition of the importance of an in-depth understanding of the context in which an intervention occurs and the diverse viewpoints of the stakeholders' (2004: 40, citing Greene). This inclines the study towards evaluation research, in which Bryman claims the 'use of the principles of experimental design are fairly entrenched' (2004: 40).

The study can also claim to be an experiment because it sets out to measure impact, in line with some social / reform policy experiments (Bryman 2004: 34). Cohen *et al.* see control – a control group is used in my study to compare grades – as finding its 'apotheosis in the experimental design'. They go on to assert that the 'essential feature' of experiments is the deliberate control and manipulation of the 'conditions which determine the events

in which [researchers] are interested' (Cohen *et al.* 2007: 272). The control group will eliminate the 'possible effects of rival explanations of a causal finding' (Bryman 2004: 35). Researchers will introduce an intervention and measure any differences (Bryman 2004: 34, Cohen *et al.* 2007: 272). In my study there is a writing intervention before a presentation: the intention is *not* to compare presentation results between students who did any writing and those who did not, because I am not interested in whether writing alone makes a difference but whether a particular *mode* of writing makes a difference. Both essay formats asked the same question, and thus the control group was only necessary to provide a comparison of grades – not any comparison of experience, because the 1000-word essay format was familiar to staff and students in the sample group whereas the 128-word format was not. Cohen *et al.*'s understanding of an experiment's independent variable – it is changed by researchers – aligns it with the comparative essay formats, and their assertion that researchers are interested in the effects of such a change on another variable (the dependent variable, in my case the presentation grades) complements this alignment. Cohen *et al.* insist that independent variables are 'isolated and controlled carefully' – as I do (all 2007: 272).

Any misgivings about the efficacy or authenticity of my control group should be tempered by Bryman's clear assertion that a 'central feature of any experiment is that it involves a *comparison*' (2004: 41, emphasis in original) – a less stridently articulated condition than 'control', and my study patently compares. Although experiments are 'typically associated' with quantitative research, the 'specific logic of comparison provides lessons of broad applicability and relevance' (Bryman 2004: 41), helping to reassert my study's credentials as an experiment. There is no suggestion here that the control group's experience should be analysed or discussed: this is especially pertinent in my study because the control group was only in place to see how grades might be affected – their experience was not relevant because their essay brief was likely to be familiar to them given their educational experiences to date. There is an issue of possible demotivation of the 1,000-word essay students: the Hawthorne Effect might be cited as a criticism of my method. However, there was no extra attention given to the 128-word essay students than to the 1,000-word essay students – only one seminar differed in plan / content – and we have seen that some students value traditional writing, and that some students are conservative and sometimes reluctant to embrace 'creative' writing (2.2.3, 2.3.2, 2.6). Some students may well have preferred the 1,000-word essay (for example interviewee 11, Appendix 3), and if some students felt that they had received the less interesting project, this may have prompted them to try to achieve more in the presentations. These nuances were outside the province of the study, especially because the question of whether the 128-word essay was more or less interesting than the 1,000-word version is subjective. Additionally, there is a suggestion in some quarters that the Hawthorne Effect 'may have been overstated', with 'other factors' contributing to productivity (Cherry n.d.).

A visual arts experiment, especially one where so much store is set by suggestive qualitative data extracted in one-to-one interviews, cannot reasonably be expected to conform to the same characteristics as a scientific one. However, there are some characteristics in common between my study and a scientific experiment described by Cohen *et al.* These are (with my explanations in brackets):

- 'Random allocation'

(Essay formats were randomly allocated to students according to their two-month pre-existing and much-used administrative, seminar and studio groups. The self-selection of essay subject – there were four subjects on offer, loosely corresponding to the main domains of the cohort, so that students could pursue their interests (but without obligation so to do) – contributed to the randomness because it did not matter who chose which subject, nor did it matter if one proved more popular than others. The make-up of staff moderating teams in the presentations varied and the sequence of students presenting did not correspond to essay format allocations – staff could not tell, therefore, which student presenting had done which essay format);

- ‘The identification of key variables’

(Key variables were the essay formats – the presentation brief and execution was the same for *all* students, irrespective of essay format allocated or subject choice, and thus was not a variable);

- ‘The control of key variables’

(All students, irrespective of essay format or subject choice, were briefed together and had the same deadline, the same amount of seminars and the same offer of draft feedback. Presentation handouts were the same for all students, and these factors were *deliberately* implemented in order to control key variables. The only difference between delivered teaching to each format group was in the content of the essay format-specific seminars; however, these seminars had the same aims and only a slightly different plan. Informal contact and exchange of ideas and experience between the students allocated differing formats could not be policed – nor are they ever, in my HE experience, outside formal exam procedures. Variables within students’ experiences which come about in the routine running of visual arts courses, such as particular tutors’ inputs or allocation of research topics for presentation, for example, are usually allowed to go unpoliced; indeed, in my experience, a vibrant studio culture will rely on overflows of experiences and confidences if it is to be a proper studio culture and not a collection of individuals who just happen to be working side-by-side);

- ‘The comparison of one group to another’

(Clearly a major part of my study in respect of grading);

(all Cohen *et al.* 2007: 273).

Cohen *et al.* claim that a ‘true experiment includes several key features’. These are (with my explanations in brackets):

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(all Cohen *et al.* 2007: 275)

The question of whether my study is an experiment or not – in any ‘true’ or ‘quasi’ sense – heralds a bigger discussion around the nature of science and its method. Cohen *et al.* helpfully list four ‘assumptions’ about the nature of science: determinism, empiricism, parsimony and generality. Firstly, they explain that determinism means that ‘events have causes’, having meaning in terms of ‘antecedents’, not denying intrinsic randomness but not acknowledging its agency either. Secondly, they list empiricism, with its emphasis on metrics obtained by direct, observable experience and evidence; thirdly, parsimony, which values an economical and uncluttered – almost austere – method; and, fourthly, they explain that generality eases the concrete into the abstract (all 2007: 11). Their explanations – and the epistemology they discuss – are clear and hard to refute, yet they also cite Kierkegaard’s impassioned belief that a ‘person’s potential’ was to be treasured because it was ‘concrete and individual, unique and irreducible, not amenable to conceptualization’ (Kierkegaard, cited in Beck, cited in Cohen *et al.* 2007: 17): a perhaps direct challenge to the precept of generality. In a softening counter to Kierkegaard, Cohen *et al.* suggest that ethnography ‘can address issues of generalizability’ as part of its commitment to seek ‘regularities, order and patterns’ within the ‘diversity [and] spontaneity of social interactions’ (2007: 169).

Bryman baldly states that an ‘epistemological issue concerns the question of what is (or should be) regarded as acceptable knowledge in a discipline’ (2004: 11). Positivism and logical positivism strove to create measurable and testable –and thus, in their terms, acceptable – criteria. Logical positivism came about in post-World War 1 Vienna, and was peopled by ‘philosophically trained scientists and scientifically trained philosophers’, asking ‘how do we know what we know?’. In the light of post-war trauma and revolutionary scientific progress, logical positivism was known as empiricism in Britain, and was closely allied to the Bauhaus ethos of clear thinking and clean design. Whilst logical positivism might seem clinically antiseptic, it nonetheless believed it could construct a better society by using evidence (all In Our Time 2009). Positivism relies on phenomenalism,

deductivism, inductivism, and objectivity (Bryman 2004: 11). This is a beguiling diet, replete with apparent contradictions and, in the last case, calling on an eternally debatable force, given that objectivity can be measured / perceived as such by agent, or examiner, or both, coevally or not, together or not.

Cohen *et al.* also set out anti-positivist arguments, some of which are constructive and allow debate because they are porous enough for two-way osmosis. Others, however, are dogmatic and suggest a somewhat reductive lack of creative understanding, coupled with the kind of intractable domain identity-building I criticised in the literature review (2.3.4). For example, Habermas believes scientific positivism (loosely encompassed by the four assumptions, above) ‘neglects hermeneutic, aesthetic, critical, moral, creative and other forms of knowledge’ (cited in Cohen *et al.* 2007: 17). However, these are relative terms, and Habermas is in danger of basing abstract criticisms on reified absolutes (also criticised in my literature review, 2.3.4). Holbrook believes that positivism and empiricism ‘bankrupt [the] inner world’, implying that they are a ‘serious danger to the more open-ended, creative, humanitarian aspects of social behaviour’ (cited in Cohen *et al.* 2007: 17), and although both of these may be true in the purest forms, they appear to side-step the beneficence implicit in logical positivism’s agenda, above. Holbrook’s argument might seem to brook no discussion, whereas Kierkegaard’s (as above, cited in Beck, cited in Cohen *et al.* 2007: 17) might seem more attractively versatile because he values subjectivity as the ‘ability to consider one’s own relationship to whatever constitutes the focus of inquiry’. Coupled with his credo that an individual’s relationship to the truth is truer than the objective truth of the truth itself – a value of process over absolutes – Kierkegaard’s views can clearly be applied to the arts as much as to more philosophical and abstract forays into physics, mathematics and cosmology, even though he himself declared that ‘anyone who is committed to science, or to rule-governed morality [these two can clearly be distinguished and separated] is benighted, and needs to be rescued from his state of darkness’ (cited in Cohen *et al.* 2007: 17). The distinction and separation are worth making: Ions, too, had a reasonable and nuanced fall-back position when declaring that his apparent objection to quantification was not ‘directed at quantification *per se*, but at quantification when it becomes an end in itself’ (Cohen *et al.* 2007: 17).

There is no good reason why scientists should see the universe as a machine instead of a living organism, yet a relentless pursuit of objectivity runs the risk of alienating us ‘from our true selves and from nature’. A reasonable anti-positivist stance might be Roszak’s (2007: 18), which Cohen *et al.* see as justifying intellectual work if it increases awareness and consciousness. This might be construed as a congruence of science and the arts, as both science and the arts could – and perhaps should – share this ethos. Bryman’s view (2004: 13) of interpretivism as an ‘alternative to the positivist orthodoxy’ is pertinent here: interpretivism respects the differences between people and the objects of the natural sciences, and therefore requires the social scientist to grasp the subjective meaning of social action.

This suggests that there is clearly room for intelligent accommodation of subjectivity in scientific method, and I am arguing for a hybrid position which renounces any reductive and counter-productive reliance on, and sanctuary in, domain boundaries, a hybrid which reflects and implements Koestler’s plea for bisociation: in this way my methodology’s theoretical and epistemological positions reflect that of a major definition and understanding of creativity used in this study. Given these arguments and overlaps between research modes, and

given Cohen *et al.*'s daring confession that the 'social and educational world is a messy place, full of contradictions, richness, complexity, connectedness, conjunctions and disjunctions' (2007: 167), I suggest that there are enough grounds to call my study's project an experiment, although I concede that it betrays ethnographic, action research and evaluation research tendencies in a productive mix rather than a careless bundle. A useful lesson in this respect is that it is clearly unwise to establish a research methodology before being absolutely sure of the research question/s and their function/s. This harks back to questions of predeterminism, above, and brings Bryman's emphasis on action research's diagnosis and treatment to mind: my study crosses domains, and it is not unreasonable for the methodology to be eclectic as a result.

The threats to the reliability⁴⁸ of this experiment were (with my explanations in brackets):

- 1) The make-up of the student cohort and range of student abilities
(This can be overstated: there is always variation and it becomes a constant. However, the variation is generally manageable year-on-year: for example, grades and classification percentages tend to be – or should be⁴⁹ – reasonably consistent, and QAA guidelines aim to establish and maintain cross-institutional parity. In my experience⁵⁰ modules are revised because of currency, not cohort variation. In addition, many students⁵¹ participated in this experiment, providing as broad and representative a sample as possible. I have conducted selective, follow-up interviews after the experiment to identify and quantify the experiment's future relevance; I have thus worked with a sample from the total population, following Cohen *et al.*'s recommendation (2007: 100));
- 2) The relationship between the experiment and the rest of the students' coursework
(Timing dealt with this. I worked closely with Foundation colleagues, and the experiment began when my Foundation lectures ended, just as the students' new practical project began. This meant their minds were as clear as possible of other course pressures, yet not artificially so: the rest of the course was not adjusted to accommodate this experiment, which was timed to be as neutral a presence as possible. The essay and the presentation were obliquely related to this new project in order to:
 - a) prevent the experiment becoming too prominent and thus less neutral;
 - b) help students value the experiment as a real – not hypothetical – challenge, in order to promote credibility, dependability, confirmability and authenticity (Bryman 2004: 274-6));
- 3) The consistency of the grading process

⁴⁸ Bryman sees reliability as 'particularly at issue in connection with quantitative research' (2004: 28), and although this study is primarily concerned with qualitative research, reliability needs to be proven.

⁴⁹ There are expected average module marks and pass rates at Coventry University's School of Art and Design, for example, and at institutions at which I am external examiner or have validated courses and programmes. Variations tend to be noted in Exam Boards and investigated. Staff concerned generally report back at termly Boards of Study meetings (or similar) and in response to the external examiner/s where appropriate. The external examiner for undergraduate Graphic Design at Coventry University has discussed the number of firsts and first class degrees awarded; these are amongst external examiner standard duties.

⁵⁰ Teaching at Coventry University, external examining and validating courses and programmes at Coventry and at other institutions, from FE through to MA levels.

⁵¹ Out of 81 registered students, 73 wrote the essays and 46 presented.

(The essays and presentations were moderated throughout. I marked all the essays and a cross-section was moderated, standard practice both at Coventry University and at comparable institutions.⁵² The presentations were graded as they took place; they were timed to allow staff to moderate as groups changed over and set up).

These threats have been identified and discussed because they concern the experiment's validity. Bryman defines this as 'concerned with the integrity of the conclusions that are generated from a piece of research' (2004: 28). Pertinent types of validity, in terms of this experiment, would be:

1. **Measurement** (is there meaningful corollary between results and purpose of experiment?)
2. **Internal validity** (is the essay really responsible for the results?)
3. **External validity** (can the experiment be applied beyond the experimental context?)

The measurement of the results (the grading) has been kept as consistent as possible, and its significance kept in sensible check. Internal validity is explored in the student responses (Chapter 5); the control group added to convincing internal validity. The experiment could easily be replicated in similar conditions – but with different aims – to those set out here, giving it external validity, albeit in an institutional context.⁵³ It is questionable how useful a square block writing exercise is in industry, if only because industry practitioners are unlikely to write essays, but there is evidence that some of what was learned in the experiment can be applied in a different context; the less clear-cut by-products of the experiment (risk-taking, using provisional meaning, mixing registers, for example) are transferable, as we have seen in the literature review and Chapter 3.

The experiment has *tended* towards an inductive theoretical approach. However, this hesitancy is because Bryman sees an inductive approach as 'theory [being] the outcome of research', although he concedes that these distinctions are 'tendencies [rather than] hard and fast distinctions' (both 2004: 9). Cohen *et al.* set out a more useful compromise: a 'combined inductive-deductive approach [in which] the researcher is involved in a back-and-forth process of induction (from observation to hypothesis) and deduction (from hypothesis to implications). Hypotheses are tested rigorously and, if necessary, revised' (2007: 6, also citing Mouly 1978). However, although the hypothesis has not changed so far overall, aspects of it may be reconsidered in the light of this experiment; for example, changing any timing and form of the essay will constitute a change – however slight – if we accept that a hypothesis cannot be separated from its manifestation. This stance looks to Bryman's definition of critical realism in his discussion of epistemological considerations: 'the categories [critical realists] employ to understand reality are likely to be provisional [and they] recognize that there is a distinction between the objects that are the focus of their enquiries and the terms they use to describe, account for, and understand it' (2004: 12). Bryman places constructionist research in a 'constant state of revision [with] a specific version of social reality, rather than one that can be regarded as definitive' (2004: 17): a tensile connection between critical realism and constructionism might therefore be detected in this experiment.

⁵² Standard practice at Coventry University is to moderate a representative sample, usually 10%, paying special attention to firsts and fails (see also 4.3.3). This is similar to UK HE institutions at which I am external examiner or where I have validated courses.

⁵³ I have already used a similar format and approach with very tight written pieces in studio conditions at Coventry University's School of Art and Design since 2007. These do not address the same question as in the experiment discussed here, but are definitely related exercises.

These considerations and approaches offer this experiment the rigour of theoretical process emerging from research practice. They allow the experiment room to breathe and to develop without being stifled by unnecessary conditions and trains of thought.

4.3 Essays

4.3.1 Introduction

The reasons for the 128-word essays' format, set against the research questions, are (in brackets):

- **RQ1** – How do insights gained from the analysis of the short story aid the setting and assessment of writing tasks in visual arts?
(The square essay concentrates on shape, and has an at-a-glance, immediately visible structure. A square is tight but is also neutral (Albers, cited in Overy 1994: 28); it should thus encourage innovative and individual approaches. It clearly presents content fitting problems, because of its size and specifics of word-count and handling. The square should appeal equally to all disciplines, echoing short story notions of deflecting criticism via formal perfection: students may foreground shaping the 128-word essay more than in a conventional essay, and thus arrive at unusual solutions. They may delimit the essay in their own way within the square);
- **RQ2** – Do short essays encourage the kind of risk-taking that we wish to foster in visual arts students?
(Risk is very hard to quantify and define, except in simplistic terms, as we have seen in the literature review. The essays' format may prompt students to use unfamiliar, risky and subversive strategies to fit content, but they may equally think that writing is not their province and that these kinds of strategies are therefore not risky because it does not matter if the writing works or not. However, by connecting the essay to a presentation, which *is* in their province, useful evidence of risk-taking might emerge. The essay is short enough for its benefits to be transferable, provided the link is not lost because of a time-lag or because the essay becomes damagingly self-referential);
- **RQ3** – What benefits for future practice can be gained through the writing of short essays that cannot be gained through the writing of long essays?
(The 128-word essay is not visual writing in Tonfoni's terms: it combines traditional aims of academic essay writing (argue a point/s, with evidence) with constraints which are not gaudy but quietly effective. The comparison between long and short is thus valid, and is *not* just a question of word count; benefits should include editing of material, playfulness, maturity, practice awareness, links and process, audience awareness, discipline awareness, enjoyment, crafting and responsibility).

4.3.2 Essays method

The entire Foundation cohort took part; 73 students out of the 81 registered submitted the essay. Students were already divided into eight alphabetical⁵⁴ groups of around 10 each for studio work. Gibbs and Habeshaw feel

⁵⁴ This is fairly standard practice in Coventry University's School of Art and Design, and in comparable institutions, although groups can sometimes be randomized automatically by intranet systems such as Moodle if required.

students might become too cosy in familiar groups (1989: 80) because they are occasionally ‘conservative’ (1992: v). However, in order to prevent disruption and to maintain neutrality, I kept the same groups. A control group was set up for ‘internal validity’ (Bryman 2000: 34). The 1000-word essay was given to the control group students because it was a familiar format and a reasonable length, given the stage of the course.⁵⁵ I briefed and tutored the 1000-word essay as I might any other conventional essay. Four groups (35 students) were given the 128-word essay and the other four groups (38 students) were given the 1000-word essay.

The four subjects in each of the 128-word and the 1,000-word versions were the same. Catt and Gregory cite ‘writing’s near-universal difficulties’ (2006: 16) and Gibbs found that students’ ‘motivational context [was] enhanced [when] students were working on a problem which mattered to them’ (1992: 86), so I allowed students to choose a subject that reflected their interests and likely future direction as much as possible. The subjects were: women’s brogues; Warhol’s Marilyn Monroe silkscreen; the new retro FIAT 500; Apple’s and Starbucks’ logos (Figures 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.4, 4.5, 4.6, 4.7, 4.8, 4.9, 4.10).

Two opposing viewpoints were outlined on each brief, and students were asked to argue for one or the other. The topic of misreading connected all the essays: the brogues for women *might* be seen as lazy design; Warhol’s silkscreen of Marilyn Monroe *might* be seen as opportunist copying; the retro FIAT *might* be seen as easy design; and the Apple logo *might* be seen as simplistic. The viewpoints were presented in almost provocatively crude binary terms: it was for the students to expand and refine the arguments. Although Catt and Gregory insist that intellectual engagement is promoted by a ‘well phrased and carefully explained assignment’ and that ‘inexplicit guidance and obscurity of expression are more likely to exacerbate students’ frustrations’ (2006: 26), a diverse cohort like Foundation may not agree on what is inexplicit or obscure. Furthermore, generating *productive* frustration (as opposed to generating frustration because of an inability to grasp the extent of the problem) is a key part of this study.

In order to minimize distractions, to prevent students from floundering (Catt and Gregory 2006: 17), and to maximise the 128-word essay’s challenges, I fitted the brief, questions and images onto one page, remembering that for Hawthorn a short story ‘is normally read at one sitting’ (2001: 51). ‘Students often find [essay assignment questions] ambiguous or even mystifying’ (Gibbs and Habeshaw 1989: 93), and I felt that students’ conceptual leap would be more attainable if the material had an appreciable formal integrity.⁵⁶ Dividing a sheet of A4 into three columns in Microsoft Word (chosen for its accessibility) meant that the essay and its two images each occupied a neat square. The neutral square contrasts with the shapes advocated by Tonfoni in her ‘syntax [in which] each shape carries a specific communicative intention’ (2000: 91). I felt that varied shapes might generate unhelpful interpretive potential, thus reducing neutrality and leading to ‘doubts about internal validity’ (Bryman 2000: 39).

⁵⁵ According to Coventry University’s DVA Assessment Tariff, 10 units make one single module (200 hours of student effort) at undergraduate level (2009: 1). 1,000 words correspond to 3.5 units, (70 hours student effort): this figure and the 1,000-word essay’s format and timing were agreed with Foundation staff as a reasonable length essay.

⁵⁶ My previous experience teaching writing assignments with comparable formal restrictions to undergraduates underpins this approach as well (see Appendix 5).

Figure 4.1. 128-word essay brief (Andy Warhol).

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Figure 4.2. 128-word essay brief (brogues).

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Figure 4.3. 128-word essay brief (FIAT 500).

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Figure 4.4. 128-word essay brief (logos).

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Figure 4.5. 128-word essay brief references page (common to all versions).

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Figure 4.6. 1000-word essay brief (Andy Warhol).

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Figure 4.7. 1000-word essay brief (brogues).

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Figure 4.8. 1000-word essay brief (FIAT 500).

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Figure 4.9. 1000-word essay brief (logos).

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Figure 4.10. 1000-word essay brief references page (common to all versions).

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Both essay format briefs contained the same images in order to focus endeavour and to minimise digression and irrelevance. The images had matching registers of focus, image quality, crop within the square, colour balance and scale. I inserted neutral exemplar text from a BBC website, and adjusted it to fit: 128 words resulted. There was thus a rationale for the word count; it had to be seen by the students as achievable real, and not arbitrary.⁵⁷ Students were given the file electronically and asked to substitute their text for the exemplar text, which was a justified block of 16 lines of 11 pt. Times. The font mattered: it needed to be effective, ubiquitous and respected. For Baines, Times is ‘arguably the most widely used typeface ever’ (2005: 65); Williamson thinks Times ‘best below 12-point’ (1966: 106) and Simon celebrates its tightness and legibility in narrow measures (1954: 13). Times has a large ‘x’ height, working well with narrow columns: this meant that the exemplar text was convincingly justified, with even word spaces and a sensation of formal care and accomplished attention. This degree of detail was important because Foundation students would probably be sensitive to such nuances, even if only subliminally. To be stimulating – yet neutral – the brief had to look intelligently designed and not intrusively self-conscious.

The aim and possible consequences of the 128-word version constraints were discussed in the briefing (Figure 4.11). The 1000-word version was briefed as a normal essay, although it had images but no exemplar text. Students were given just over two weeks to do these essays. The following week, students had a one-hour seminar in their designated groups. The 128-word essay students were not taught with the 1,000-word essay students. Issues emerging common to groups were discussed to maintain neutrality and to help students see the problems and potential of the essays. The points were written up on a flip-chart and subsequently published on Moodle (Figures 4.12, 4.13).

In the 1000-word essay seminars, the aim was to help students start (Figure 4.14); I find this vital, as do Catt and Gregory (2006: 16):

The objectives of the seminar were:

- To establish precisely what one sample essay question asks;
- To agree on outline content of one essay;
- To write the opening sentence.

Discussions covered context and the meaning of the questions (implicit as well as explicit); the number of points that could be made in an essay this length; considerations of structure (introduction, main body, conclusion); and improving the quality of the argument by research and references⁵⁸ (students had been shown how to use the University database⁵⁹).

⁵⁷ A small project I did with level 1 undergraduate Fashion students at Coventry University’s School of Art and Design in 2008 had a word count of exactly 152. This was because the project was on Dior, and *Vogue*’s 1947 introductory article on Dior only had 152 words. Students found the word count unusual – not to say bizarre – surprising and engagingly precise: this evidence is admittedly anecdotal, but it helped shape this experiment, in particular the word count.

⁵⁸ These are standard topics, and would be discussed in similar essay assignments.

⁵⁹ Neither the 1000-word nor the 128-word assignment asked students to reference in text. In my experience most Foundation students are not ready to reference rigorously; indeed, in my experience insistence on formal referencing can appear (to an appreciable majority of these students) to be arcane, counter-intuitive and ultimately inhibiting. I therefore decided that the students should list their sources according to Harvard at the end of their essay, and make it as evident as possible within the text of their essays that their points of view had solid support.

Figure 4.11. General essay brief (both versions).

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Figure 4.12. Flip-chart notes from sessions (1 of 2).

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Figure 4.13. Flip-chart notes from sessions (2 of 2).

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Figure 4.14. Seminar aims and objectives (my copy).

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In the 128-word essay seminars, the aim was also to get students writing. However, the objectives were slightly different because the essay was so different (Figure 4.14). The third objective now addressed the omissions likely because of the tight word count. Discussions covered summarizing an argument, saying more in less using techniques such as cuts in sentences, breaking rules of grammar and punctuation, using synonyms to achieve a good fit and perhaps more – and unexpected – meaning, and using suggestion, jargon, slang and apposite vagueness.

The essays were to be evaluated using two criteria. Students were not given the criteria's precise wording before the experiment (although the aim of the experiment was discussed): this was to prevent them becoming too inhibited by grades concerns. The first criterion – for **both** essays – was content success: how far the essay 'hits the mark'. The evaluation also provided the reverse: 'hits the mark' had an opposite of 'off the boil'. This reverse is sobering: a first class mark of 70% in any assignment is commendable, yet 30% of the total, nearly 50% of that 70% mark, denotes the opposite. I chose these phrases because of their immediacy and relevance (Gibbs and Habeshaw 1989: 171, 167),⁶⁰ because students frequently check their grades but do not always check the criteria to see *how* those grades were achieved.⁶¹

The second 128-word essay criterion was 'inventive', opposed by 'conventional'. I found 'imaginative' too capricious and 'creative' too formulaic, whereas I thought 'inventive' suggested restrictions (and thus the reality and relevance of the experiment), encompassed unusual grammar, vague language and / or contemporary slang, autonomy and innovation. I preferred 'conventional' to the negative associations of 'routine', 'average', 'normal' or 'basic', because in order to hit the mark the essay could still be conventional. It was important that I did not celebrate any innovation in writing the short essay so emphatically that it stopped students connecting invention and success by themselves, or writing it in their own way: we should not do 'the work which the pupils themselves ought to do' (Sayers 1947: 8).

The second 1000-word essay criterion was 'tight', opposed by 'loose'. I first thought 'structured' ideal, opposed by 'muddled', but 'muddled' is negative and casual, in a different register to 'structured'. I then thought 'structured' too specific, and decided that 'tightness' suggested an ordered argument, well-paced, concise, articulate, without repetition. I saw 'looseness' as rambling, repetitious, disconnected and waffly. These are familiar criticisms of essays at all levels, but I felt looseness was not so negative as to make evaluation too reductive: an essay could hit the mark and yet still be loose, although this calls for sophisticated mastery. 'Tight' should not be thought restrictive: it is an aspirational quality, resonating with visual arts students.⁶² I wanted the

⁶⁰ I conceived and wrote these phrases, then discussed them with colleagues to moderate them and to make sure that they made sense: they were left unchanged.

⁶¹ In my experience of teaching since 1996, and as an external examiner and course validator, this is a recurring phenomenon and not without a basis in the shared experience of colleagues in the UK HE sector and beyond: an email from a colleague in a Polish institution teaching architecture laments that increasing bureaucratisation focuses students on ECTS points more than study (Zmudzinska 2012). This also suggests that it is not the students alone who should be blamed, but that is beyond the province of this study.

⁶² For example, tightness is emphasised and celebrated as a part of the Learning Outcomes for 257 DVA Typography 2 (a module in Coventry University's School of Art and Design and comparable to other modules in comparable institutions), which reads: 'produce

second criterion words in both assignments to have matching registers but also to be in contrasting registers to ‘hits the mark’ and ‘off the boil’.

‘Inventive’ and ‘tight’ were not intended ends but *means* (to make the essays ‘hit the mark’). The accessibly phrased, content-related criterion expressed by ‘hits the mark’ and ‘off the boil’ needed to be underpinned by legitimate endeavour: ‘inventive’, ‘conventional’, ‘tight’ and ‘loose’ are not slang or casual terms which might undermine students’ confidence in the project (some students have already been described as ‘conservative’, above). For this reason, too, words were chosen so that neither opposing partner word was a direct negative (for example, ‘imaginative’ and ‘*unimaginative*’). This might have been reductive because students might have seen it as too easy: it might thus have caused the ‘anxiety associated with risk-taking’ (Cowan 1998: 119) because it might have been seen to come from a disconnected higher authority (see literature review discussions of risk).

4.3.3 Findings

I graded the essays and a colleague moderated them according to Coventry University practice. Moderation of essays is taken to mean double-marking by a second reader and then resolving differences, with resort to further moderation if there are differences which become problematic and not easily resolvable, such as those which span a classification. Gibbs and Habeshaw see moderation as a ‘check on standards and unreliability by seeking second opinions, monitoring comparative courses and by checking on biases in a systematic way’ (1989: 94). In order to maintain productive impartiality, one might ask for a moderator to be a subject expert with an objective separation from the project in question.

The essays in the study were moderated for me by a full-time staff colleague in my subject area, and we have worked together for some time moderating both written and practical work both for each other and for other staff colleagues. We moderate blind (without knowing what grade has been awarded by the other reader), but it is not always possible to moderate anonymously (not knowing who the author / maker is). Not to mark anonymously would be unwise, and unfair, were there any possibility of bias, as the ‘sex of a student [for example] can have pronounced effects on marks’ (Gibbs and Habeshaw 1989: 94). However, we are experienced professionals, and we are used to marking work when we are aware of the author / maker’s identity. It is very hard to mark studio work anonymously, and much of the time we are aware of a student’s essay / dissertation topic even if the name is redacted, and we are thus aware of the student’s identity. It might be possible to bring in a reader from inside the institution but from outside the course; however, this might cause problems due to the likelihood of this reader being from a different discipline and thus perhaps immune to particular nuances of content and trends. Problems of anonymity and bias are well handled by the external examination system, but it was not feasible to employ one in my study due to time constraints because the presentations followed the essays very closely. However, although my colleague does some studio teaching on Foundation, he had done none that academic year by the time of the essays. This meant that he was a visual arts

original work that demonstrates form and content synthesis through stylistic consistency, coherence, harmonious text / image integration’ (Coventry University 2010). Tightness is not referred to by name, its implicit presence perhaps rooting it more deeply in practice.

subject specialist moderating anonymously, as the chances of him knowing any of the students were minimal – he was thus as near as possible to an external examiner.

In my study, we simply followed Coventry University procedure: this means that as the project tutor, I read all the essays, and grade them. All fails and firsts and a representative 10% sample of the rest are then handed over – blind – to the moderator (the second reader) along with a brief, any handouts, lesson plans etc. if appropriate. Gibbs and Habeshaw feel that ‘it is important that second markers understand something about the nature of the supervision a student received’ (1989: 114). This practice, however, perhaps kindly aimed at mitigating poor submissions if it was felt that the students had been badly prepared, can also skew results by introducing an unprovable dimension into the equation: one can confidently assess material when one is reading it against criteria, but it is unwise to speculate on the student’s experience and the extent to which supporting materials and guidance might have been absorbed without first-hand evidence. For this reason, I gave the second reader the brief and the criteria but no seminar handouts, although I outlined the unfolding of the project.

Once the sample essays were read, we discussed the grades. Crucially, we did not split any differences, even if the difference was very small. I do not approve of splitting the difference (although it is not an uncommon practice, in my experience) because it means that the student ends up with a grade or classification neither reader wanted to give: an eccentric, if not misplaced, example of the wisdom of the Judgement of Solomon. If the problem is intractable, I will call in a third (and sometimes a fourth) reader. This is particularly important when the grades span a classification ($2:1 > 3^{\text{rd}}$, $62\% > 48\%$, for example), or when the second reader deems a piece a fail, or a 1^{st} , and I have not. Quite simply, we have to negotiate: in this project, although we did not agree all the grades outright, we did not have to call in a third or fourth reader. It could have been that consensus was easier to reach overall because the 128-word essay was unfamiliar, and so we were both feeling our way, and anxious to establish a pattern and a working taxonomy with these essays, with neither reader happy to bypass a negotiated settlement. We also had the familiar format of the 1,000-word essays as a control, especially with regard to content management – this has been repeatedly stressed as the main criterion of the essays and is especially pertinent to the 128-word version. It was important to get the information in, and not to let the content be excused by the form; it may be *governed* by the form, but that is a separate issue, and is discussed in the analysis in 4.3.4 – see also Figures 4.17, 4.18, 4.19, 4.20.

A very important factor in this project was that there was no overall grade given for either the essays or the presentations, as the grades did not directly affect any coursework, see above (4.1). The students were only given the grades for the criteria (with the whole picture – i.e. if they received 70%, they were made aware that they had dropped 30% - this is explained in 4.3.2, below). This meant that when grading we were seeing the *results* but not the *effects* of the results, the component parts but not an overall picture: the final overall picture (the final overall grade when there are grades attached to criteria such as individual learning outcomes, for example) is often initially debated, in my experience, when markers disagree, and the grades attached to individual learning outcomes are usually only individually reassessed, as a method of recalibrating the overall grade in order to reach agreement. Freed from the burden of an overall grade, in this study we were able to be forthright and decisive about our grades because they were only attached to individual criteria. The sobering part

of the process was realising what had not been achieved – e.g. 30% when a grade of 70% was awarded – and this brake also helped us agree grades more readily because we could see both sides of the grade: what had been achieved and what had not. This also applied to the presentations' grading.

The presentations were all marked simultaneously (the essay second reader was not involved). The marks form is reproduced (Figures 4.31, 4.32) and there were usually three studio staff marking these – myself and two others, these others always being Foundation studio staff colleagues, although occasionally – but not often – there would be just myself and one other Foundation studio staff colleague. Whenever I mark presentations at Coventry University, I try to do it with another staff colleague in the appropriate subject area: it is extremely rare, especially as students get nearer their final years, for me to allow presentations to be marked alone because there is no way of repeating the presentation for a moderator – even when filmed it loses something. There are instances when presentations need to take place in a short space of time – there may be staffing problems, room booking difficulties, time pressures or issues of fairness which mean that to spread the presentations over two or more days causes difficulties and that it is not feasible to moderate every presentation. In these cases a moderator will attend several presentations with different staff members, make a note of his / her marks, and then the marks are discussed and moderated afterwards with the rest of the staff. The disadvantage with this – apart from it meaning that a smaller sample is moderated – is that one cannot be sure if a reasonable span of proposed grades are being moderated.

In the case of the presentations in my study, none of this was necessary: the presentations were very short, and moderation was done after every batch of around 10 students. This meant that the presentations could be kept brisk and prompt, and the size of the group meant that it was not difficult when moderating to remember the early presentations: a group of around 10 would only take around 20 minutes to present (each student had two minutes, and there was no complex technology to fix up between presenters). There were no prolonged disagreements. For both the essays and the presentations, this seemed an eminently fair and robust assessment system, with appropriate and adequate moderation.

An interesting fact emerges from an analysis of the grades of the essays and presentations: of the 287 grades (or indeed 574, given that each grade had its other side presented, e.g. 70% and 30% - see above and 4.3.2⁶³), only three (or six, if counting both sides of the grade) were odd numbers. These were a mark of 55% (with 45% as the other side) and two marks of 5% (with 95% as the other side) for one of the 128-word essay's criteria (for two different students), and it might be mischievously argued that 5 is the most even of the odd numbers given it is precisely half of base 10. We made no conscious decision to limit ourselves to even numbers, nor to a particular marks range – we used the full range from 0% - 100% (Table 4.2). Two factors might account for this phenomenon of even numbers: firstly, that both the essay project and the presentations were part of an experiment, and the criteria's terminology and feedback diagrams were unusual (at least for myself and for my colleagues (see 4.3.2); secondly; we were not generating a final overall grade (see above). These two factors

⁶³ 35 students did the 128-word essay, 38 did the 1,000-word essay, making a total of 73; each essay had two criteria, making 146 total; 47 students did the presentations, making 141 grades because the presentations had three criteria. This makes a total of 287 grades, or 574 if one counts each grade being expressed as its positive and its negative, i.e. 70% and 30%.

were novel for us, and it may be that in a subconscious effort to create order to counteract the novelty, we resorted to even numbers.

Other factors which may also have had a subconscious effect in making us seek order are the lack of an essay grading sheet (we just wrote numbers down on the essay print-outs, and this perhaps casual approach may have caused us to compensate by being orderly with our grades: without due psychological information – which is outside the province of this study – it is unwise to speculate); and the presentation grading sheet (which I devised to speed things up and which had little room for writing – Figures 4.31, 4.32): this (along with the time pressure) may have made us resort to the round numbers that are characteristic of every single presentation grade.

Surely not unconnected to any (subconscious or not) urge to create order when grading is a move to band marking. Although we did not do this in my study, I have been piloting band marking in my undergraduate marking with other colleagues: it has been very successful, with the possibility of broader take-up across Coventry University. The relevance of band marking to this discussion of moderation in my study is that my colleagues and I find band marking much easier to moderate than when we use every number (in band marking we use the full range from 0% to 100% as we would when using every number available, so students' achievements are not compromised nor are their failures massaged). We are not reduced to quibbling over minute differences: Gibbs and Habeshaw concede that 'even with clear criteria your marking is likely to be subjective and unreliable'. They go on to discourage arguments over minute grades differences because 'we simply don't use assessment measures that are that accurate' (both Gibbs and Habeshaw 1989: 94). The band marking I have been piloting uses three grades in each classification band – e.g. 41%, 44%, 47% – and so moderation discussions are about whether the students' work is in a zone rather than whether it is worth a percentage point or so more or less. These decisions are very hard to defend, especially if some time has elapsed between the grading and any questioning of the grading. This has led, in my experience so far, to much more agreeable and efficient moderation and far fewer student queries and complaints. Using even numbers predominantly in my study – even if this was done subconsciously – resulted in band marking of a sort, and there were very few moderation difficulties nor any student queries about their grades. It could be argued that the project and its diagrammatic grading display were novel and thus students' confidence to question was undermined: whilst this argument is persuasive, a persuasive counter-argument would be that these students were new to an HE environment, and thus criteria and a grading display which might seem novel to experienced staff and students might seem less novel to more *inexperienced* students, whose expectations might well be less well formed.

The grades were then converted for student feedback using Microsoft Office into direct and graphic pie charts (Figures 4.15, 4.16), which provided a proportional sense of achievement. Numbers were eliminated in order to concentrate students' attentions on the main issues, and to avoid familiar values which may have led students to compare results and efforts with previous assignments: I felt this might make them lose sight of their achievements in *this* assignment, a critical loss because these essays were expected to inspire students' presentations.

Summary of 128-word essay grades

- a)** overall 'hits the mark' average = 57%
- b)** 19 essays (54% of test group) = conservative ('inventive' grades 0%)
- c)** 'hits the mark' average of **b)** = 43%
- d)** 8 essays (23% of test group) = moderately 'inventive' (grades range 5-20%)
- e)** 'hits the mark' average of **d)** = 60%
- f)** 8 essays (23% of test group) = very 'inventive' (grades range 70-96%)
- g)** 'hits the mark' average of **f)** = 87%
- h)** 'inventive' average of **d)** and **f)** = 49%
- i)** 'hits the mark' average of **d)** and **f)** = 73%

According to these averages, calculated in the same way as any module average to provide actionable data,⁶⁴ the more inventive the essay, the more it hit the mark, suggesting that if there was good content, an imaginative, ingenious and persistent student would find ways of making it fit. The averages also suggest that the reverse is true. However, these grades are trend indicators, and more reliable in-depth data is to be found in Chapter 5, 'Student responses'.

Summary of 1,000-word essay grades

- a)** overall 'hits the mark average' = 59%
- b)** 20 essays (53% of control group) = below average (0-56%) grades for 'tight'
- c)** 'hits the mark' average of **b)** = 46%
- d)** 15 essays (40% of control group) = average and above average (57-100%) grades for 'tight'
- e)** 'hits the mark' average of **d)** = 76%
- f)** average 'hits the mark' of essays getting 70%+ for 'tight' = 82%

These grades also suggest that the tighter the essay, the more it hits the mark, although I would expect that in any conventional essay like this. A comparison of the 1000-word **f)** average with the 128-word **g)** average (essays in each category with the highest formal grade) shows that the 128-word essays outperformed the 1000-word essays in hitting the mark.

⁶⁴ This is my experience at Coventry University and at every other institution with which I have been associated, in any capacity.

Figure 4.15. 128-word essay grades pie chart (example – name redacted).

Figure 4.16. 1000-word essay grades pie chart (example – name redacted).



Table 4.1. Essay grades (both versions) with all criteria grades.

128-word essay					1000-word essay				
student	hits the mark	off the boil	inventive	conventional	student	hits the mark	off the boil	tight	loose
1	58	42	20	80	36	64	36	68	32
2	56	44	0	100	37	54	46	40	60
3	55	45	0	100	38	76	24	70	30
4	60	40	0	100	39	64	36	60	40
5	90	10	80	20	40	64	36	58	42
6	50	50	0	100	41	76	24	80	20
7	86	14	74	26	42	76	24	68	32
8	50	50	0	100	43	20	80	20	80
9	20	80	0	100	44	46	54	20	80
10	50	50	5	95	45	64	36	34	66
11	60	40	20	80	46	82	18	100	0
12	48	52	0	100	47	86	14	78	22
13	40	60	0	100	48	62	38	56	44
14	40	60	0	100	49	78	22	88	12
15	30	70	0	100	50	52	48	24	76
16	36	64	6	94	51	84	16	58	42
17	28	72	0	100	52	92	8	94	6
18	90	10	90	10	53	22	78	12	88
19	96	4	90	10	54	22	78	14	86
20	56	44	0	100	55	22	78	10	90
21	38	62	0	100	56	62	38	56	44
22	38	62	0	100	57	68	32	60	40
23	36	64	0	100	58	56	44	48	52
24	84	16	96	4	59	58	42	40	60
25	90	10	76	24	60	78	22	68	32
26	70	30	20	80	61	46	54	32	68
27	68	32	10	90	62	66	34	58	42
28	64	36	0	100	63	66	34	40	60
29	34	66	0	100	64	54	46	36	64
30	78	22	70	30	65	46	54	40	60
46	44	56	0	100	66	54	46	44	56
32	58	42	10	90	67	54	46	44	56
33	30	70	0	100	68	52	48	48	52
34	64	36	20	80	69	38	62	36	64
35	84	16	90	10	70	54	46	50	50
					71	52	48	48	52
					72	82	18	74	26
					73	44	56	44	56

Apart from the differences in averages examined, above, this table shows that there were more extreme (single figure, 100%) marks in the 128-word essay format than in the 1000-word, suggesting either complete commitment or inability / unwillingness to engage.

4.3.4 Discussion

It would be impractical to analyse every essay, but I have provided analyses and grades of three of each topic,⁶⁵ (see Figures 4.17, 4.18, 4.19, 4.20). I have highlighted points in the essays (there is no colour-coding in this particular analysis: the colours are used simply to differentiate points), and have commented below each essay. These are not necessarily examples that span the marks range because grades' distribution is not the most important part of this study: these examples are interesting and demonstrate the potential of the experiment. I have also linked my comments beneath each example to literature review themes, and thus implicitly to the research questions.

I have avoided any complex linguistic analysis because that is not the province of this study: what matters is the student experience, risk and the essays' application to practice. Students' awareness of linguistic practice and conventions will vary hugely. This variation will dull any recognition or evaluation of risk in the essays as some students will be more conscious of the risk they take than others if linguistics are the critical filter. If practice and experience of writing so far are the critical filters, then risks can be more convincingly identified: the notion of conscious risk is discussed in the literature review.

⁶⁵ Out of 35 students, 13 chose Warhol (37%), 12 chose logos (35%) and 5 each (14%) chose shoes or cars. This may be because painting and graphics are more familiar pre-Foundation topics, but this speculation is outside the province of this study, as is any comparison of marks relating to topic choice.

Figure 4.17. 128-word essay analysis (Andy Warhol).

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Figure 4.18. 128-word essay analysis (brogues).

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Figure 4.19. 128-word essay analysis (FIAT 500).

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Figure 4.20. 128-word essay analysis (logos).

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4.4 Presentations

4.4.1 Introduction

The presentations, which took place shortly after the essays were graded, asked students to consider how a piece of their current practical work might be misread (Figure 4.21). This is an important aspect of their practice: they need to be imaginatively objective about their work. Many students in my experience are unsettled by presentations: however, presentations are respected in the creative industries because they are used a great deal, demonstrating creativity and quality in content and style.

Students had a new practical project on ‘Intervention, Interruption, Interference’, which was thus closely related to the essays: it *could* have been argued that women’s brogues *interfered* with traditions of gendered design; that Warhol had *intervened* in the way Marilyn Monroe’s mythic status was being created; that the new, retro FIAT 500 *interrupted* contemporary design evolution; and that the more complex a logo was, the more it conditioned responses and *interfered* with free association. These points were discussed in seminars with students.

4.4.2 Method

The eight groups were reduced to four by combining a 128-word essay group with a 1000-word essay group. The presentations were watched by staff and the group members, making an audience of around 22 or 23: not the entire cohort, which might have been unsettling or intimidating. One hour was allowed for each group’s presentations. Not as many students presented as submitted essays.⁶⁶ 47 students presented: 26 of the 128-word essay writers and 21 of the 1000-word essay writers (64% of the total number who submitted an essay).

In order to increase student autonomy and to licence diverse responses, the brief was not exhaustive. Students were advised to consider what the brief did *not* say, what it did *not* exclude: I emphasised that client briefs frequently only reflect clients’ horizons, and that creativity elevates a brief’s potential. The presentation had to be wordless to reduce any embarrassment which may have affected the neutrality required, and to emphasise the imagery. Students were told to bring the work as print-outs; this was to speed up the presentations by eliminating upload problems and digital skills’ imbalances. The work was projected by a visualizer, hooked up to a standard data projector, onto a screen in an undergraduate studio (neutral for Foundation).

Risk-taking and inventiveness were recommended both in the briefing and in the supporting documents because presentation time was short, and students could not explain or justify their images verbally. The brief thus

⁶⁶ Some students were unwell, some had to deal with family and / or personal circumstances, and some had to attend Open Days at other universities. These are familiar circumstances, but because presentations are a single event these circumstances can affect attendance more critically than in ongoing projects.

echoed familiar problems for visual arts students: the brief might be unclear or ambiguous (this distinction is discussed in the literature review, 2.3); its potential rewards might be hard to discern; there were tight restrictions in one sense, yet potentially confusing freedom in another sense: just what *were* the images meant to contain? The brief also contained more familiar, generic difficulties: there were restrictions of size and shape to overcome; there was a clear argument to get across; the extent of the discussion had to be marshalled in order to prevent weakening digression; it was unclear what the audience already knew and expected. These problems were the same for both groups of essay-writing students: it was crucial for the purity of the experiment that *both* sets of students had the same build-up to the presentations.

Techniques and ideas were discussed after the launch, and prompts and guidance were published. However, this kind of support would be given in *any* presentation brief, and it was important to keep the process as familiar – and thus as neutral – as possible. The first document opened up the terms ‘hits the mark’, ‘off the boil’, ‘inventive’, ‘conventional’, ‘tight’ and ‘loose’, offering help in interpreting the essay’s feedback (Figure 4.22). The next document (Figure 4.23) offered tips on how to use the essays for inspiration in the presentation, and explained how content (as expressed by ‘hits the mark’, ‘off the boil’) and form (as expressed by ‘inventive’, ‘conventional’, ‘tight’, ‘loose’) were interlocked. Other documents (Figures 4.24, 4.25, 4.26, 4.27, 4.28) explored some of the presentation’s formal concerns, such as layout and cropping images, and two offered last-minute support (4.29, 4.30).

Figure 4.21. Presentation brief.

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Figure 4.22. Help interpreting essay feedback.

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Figure 4.23. Using essays for inspiration.

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Figure 4.24. Cropping pictures (1 of 2).

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Figure 4.25. Cropping pictures (2 of 2).

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Figure 4.26. Picture and layout ideas (1 of 3).

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Figure 4.27. Picture and layout ideas (2 of 3).

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Figure 4.28. Pictures and layout ideas (3 of 3).

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Figure 4.29. Some important last-minute thoughts.

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Figure 4.30. One last big thought... .

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Figure 4.31. Staff grading sheet for presentations.

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Figure 4.32. Part of staff grading sheet for presentations filled in, showing changes after moderation (the icons represent 100% - 50% - 0% stages, top to bottom).

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Figure 4.33. Presentation feedback pie chart, both essay formats (example – name redacted).

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4.4.3 Findings

I watched and evaluated the presentations with at least one other member of staff (with some presentations being watched by three staff members). Staff used a simple, quick and graphic way of recording grades on the spot (Figure 4.31), in order to minimize pauses between presentations, which, if intrusive, may have distracted and unsettled students. The criteria was familiar: ‘hits the mark’ / ‘off the boil’, ‘inventive’ / ‘conventional’, ‘tight’ / ‘loose’. There was thus a coming-together of the criteria used in each of the essay assignments. ‘Tight’ was understood by marking staff to be ‘coherent’ between form and content: this was discussed when moderating.

Presentation change-overs were brisk, meaning staff could not check how well presenting students had done in their essays. This was deliberate: knowing the essay grades might have created bias or uncertainty in the presentation grading. There was around 10 minutes between groups, and staff used this to discuss and moderate the grades they had each put on their sheets. I subsequently converted these into pie charts like the essay grades (Figure 4.32, 4.33). The other staff were familiar with the students’ practical work, and I was familiar with the students’ essays: the moderation was both informed and informing (see explanation of moderation, 4.3.3).

The visualizer projects anything that is placed on it, allowing students to use 3D objects and to draw on, tear or move their images around (or otherwise *intervene*, *interrupt*, or *interfere* with them): in short, to make their presentations more inventive. Some students understood that the image was what appeared on the screen, and not what was placed on the visualizer. Some did subvert, or at least explore, the brief’s restrictions: for example, some experimented with gesture as they put their images on the visualizer, some drew on them, some images were 3D and rocked back and forth on the visualizer, some students slipped different backgrounds behind a main image, some made their pictures move across the screen, some had composite images (thus questioning what ‘number’ of images might really mean), one student asked somebody else to put her images on the visualizer (her work concerned authorship) and one student did her presentation to music. In what might have been taken to be an ironic parody of the brief (but sadly was not) one student had misread the restrictions and thought he was allowed to speak. He had trussed himself up in cling-film to convey ‘restraint’ and at the last minute asked someone else to read out his script. This is because he realized that the brief did not explicitly exclude anybody else speaking (any more than it excluded words on the screen, as in a silent movie).

Summary of presentation grades

- a) 128-word essay students (55% of test group) “hits the mark” average = 68%
- b) 1,000-word essay students (45% of test group) “hits the mark” average = 63%
- c) All 47 students “hits the mark” average = 66%
- d) 128-word essay students “inventive” average = 68%
- e) 1,000-word essay students “inventive” average = 66%
- f) All 47 students “inventive” average = 67%
- g) 128-word essay students “tight” average = 67%
- h) 1,000-word essay students “tight” average = 59%
- i) All 47 students “tight” average = 63%

The average ‘hits the mark’ for all the 47 presenters was 66%. This is above that of the essays, which was 57% for the 128-word essays and 59% for the 1000-word essays. This is significant in university grades because it takes the average out of one classification band and into another. However, when the figure is broken down, it became apparent that the 128-word essay writers had a better ‘hits the mark’ score (68% against 63%) than those who had done the 1000-word essay. The difference between these figures is small, as is the difference between the ‘inventive’ score of the 128-word essay students and the 1000-word essay students (68% against 66%), because they are all in the same classification band. The difference between the 128-word essay students and the 1000-word essay students in their ‘tight’ as opposed to ‘loose’ scores is significant because the 128-word essay students averaged 67%, whereas the 1000-word essay students only averaged 59% (a classification band difference), with the whole cohort averaging 63% in this category. This suggests a link between the tightness of the 128-word essay and the tightness of the presentations.

There was only a slight difference in presentation ‘inventiveness’ (2% more) on the part of the 128-word essay students over the 1,000-word essay students. The difference between the two groups of essay writers in the presentation tightness was greater: 67% (128-word) against 59% (1,000-word). This is interesting because ‘tight’ was not one of the 128-word essay criteria, and thus (apart from any informal exchanges of results between students) an unknown quantity. This result *suggests* that the 128-word students were able to *apply* their experience in creating their essays – the restrictions, the inventive paring-down of the information, the perhaps new modes of expression – to their practice in a different yet measurable way. They did this, significantly, in an autonomous way: without explicit articulation (either in the essays or in their feedback) of this factor as it might be applied in art and design practice. This suggests that this restricted format appealed to the students, but also that it was a relevant and applicable invention with a purpose and a measurable outcome.

Of the 26 128-word essay writers presenting, 14 showed a ‘hits the mark’ improvement compared to their ‘hits the mark’ essay score. This equated to 54% of that particular group; however, of the 1000-word essay writers 12 improved in this respect, equating to 57% of that particular group. Whilst this might suggest that the short essay is not a tool for improvement, there are other figures which should be taken into consideration. In the 128-word essay group, only seven had a worse ‘hits the mark’ score for their presentation than for their essay (27% of that group), whereas nine of the 1000-word group had a worse mark in this respect (43% of that group). None of the 1000-word group had the same ‘hits the mark’ score for their essay as they did for their presentation, whereas five (19%) of the 128-word essay writers received the same mark for their essay as they did for their presentation. This means that a figure of 73% of the 128-word essay writers either had an even or an improved performance in their presentations, whereas only 57% of the 1000-word essay writers achieved an even or an improved performance. Additionally, it is worth repeating here that the 128-word essay writers showed a bigger overall improvement from essay to presentation in the ‘hits the mark’ category than their 1000-word counterparts: 10.5% improvement against 4.5% improvement.

Table 4.2. Essay and presentation grades (names redacted).

128-word essay			
Number	Name	Essay	Presentation
		hits the mark/off the boil; inventive/conventional	hits the mark/off the boil; inventive/conventional; tight/loose
1		58/42; 20/80	80/20; 90/10; 80/20
2		56/44; 0/100	-
3		55/45; 0/100	60/40; 60/40; 90/10
4		60/40; 0/100	60/40; 50/50; 50/50
5		90/10; 80/20	-
6		50/50; 0/100	70/30; 60/40; 40/60
7		86/14; 74/26	80/20; 70/30; 80/20
8		50/50; 0/100	60/40; 60/40; 80/20
9		20/80; 0/100	50/50; 50/50; 60/40
10		50/50; 5/95	50/50; 40/60; 50/50
11		60/40; 20/80	60/40; 60/40; 70/30
12		48/52; 0/100	60/40; 70/30; 60/40
13		40/60; 0/100	-
14		40/60; 0/100	60/40; 30/70; 30/70
15		30/70; 0/100	-
16		36/64; 6/94	70/30; 60/40; 50/50
17		28/72; 0/100	-
18		90/10; 90/10	90/10; 80/20; 70/30
19		96/4; 90/10	80/20; 90/10; 80/20
20		56/44; 0/100	60/40; 50/50; 70/30
21		38/62; 0/100	-
22		38/62; 0/100	-
23		36/64; 0/100	80/20; 90/10; 80/20
24		84/16; 96/4	70/30; 80/20; 80/20
25		90/10; 76/24	90/10; 100/0; 90/10
26		70/30; 20/80	-
27		68/32; 10/90	70/30; 60/40; 50/50
28		64/36; 0/100	60/40; 70/30; 70/30
29		34/66; 0/100	-
30		78/22; 70/30	70/30; 80/20; 70/30
31		78/22; 5/95	80/20; 90/10; 80/20
32		58/42; 10/90	70/30; 70/30; 80/20
33		30/70; 0/100	60/40; 50/50; 50/50
34		64/36; 20/80	50/50; 60/40; 50/50
35		84/16; 90/10	80/20; 90/10; 80/20
1000-word essay			
		hits the mark/off the boil; tight/loose	hits the mark/off the boil; inventive/conventional; tight/loose
1		64/36; 68/32	-
2		54/46; 40/60	60/40; 80/20; 60/40
3		76/24; 70/30	-
4		64/36; 60/40	-
5		64/36; 58/42	60/40; 70/30; 40/60
6		76/24; 80/20	-
7		76/24; 68/32	80/20; 70/30; 70/30
8		20/80; 20/80	-
9		46/54; 20/80	60/40; 70/30; 60/40
10		64/36; 34/66	50/50; 50/50; 60/40
11		82/18; 100/0	60/40; 70/30; 70/30
12		86/14; 78/22	50/50; 50/50; 50/50

■	■■■■■	62/38; 56/44	50/50; 60/40; 70/30
■	■■■■■	78/22; 88/12	80/20; 80/20; 70/30
■	■■■■■	52/48; 24/76	-
■	■■■■■	84/16; 58/42	60/40; 70/30; 70/30
■	■■■■■	92/8; 94/6	80/20; 90/10; 80/20
■	■■■■■	22/78; 12/88	50/50; 40/60; 20/80
■	■■■■■	22/78; 14/86	-
■	■■■■■	22/78; 10/90	-
■	■■■■■	62/38; 56/44	20/80; 20/80; 10/90
■	■■■■■	68/32; 60/40	80/20; 60/40; 50/50
■	■■■■■	56/44; 48/52	80/20; 80/20; 60/40
■	■■■■■	58/42; 40/60	-
■	■■■■■	78/22; 68/32	-
■	■■■■■	46/54; 32/68	70/30; 60/40; 50/50
■	■■■■■	66/34; 58/42	70/30; 70/30; 70/30
■	■■■■■	66/34; 40/60	80/20; 100/0; 90/10
■	■■■■■	54/46; 36/64	60/40; 70/30; 50/50
■	■■■■■	46/54; 40/60	-
■	■■■■■	54/46; 44/56	-
■	■■■■■	54/46; 44/56	-
■	■■■■■	52/48; 48/52	-
■	■■■■■	38/62; 36/64	-
■	■■■■■	54/46; 50/50	70/30; 70/30; 70/30
■	■■■■■	52/48; 48/52	-
■	■■■■■	82/18; 74/26	60/40; 50/50; 70/30
■	■■■■■	44/56; 44/56	-

4.5 Conclusion

The essays manifestly and diversely demonstrate literature review themes. There is evidence of intelligent, substantial and eclectic content: seen by many as short story prerequisites, as discussed in the literature review. Some bring the reader in, as writers abdicate responsibility and readers activate the text. The essays show a range of short story formal characteristics, unambiguously linking the form / content plastic skills of the visual artist with the essay block: for example, openers; repeats; delimitation and use of discernible, at-a-glance form; connections to other art forms (sampled music, documentary, sound, voice-over). Some essays are risky, happily in different ways: some use vague language techniques like manipulating punctuation and short forms; some have ignored very specific brief requirements like tight spacing but have produce tensile spacing instead (another definition of tight, but not one I expected or asked for); some wrote monologues; some switched narrators; some linked points; some verbalised diagrams; some shouted; some reasoned quietly; some could have been tapped out on phone keys. All these examples take student writing outside the norms of visual arts academic writing as I have experienced it. As I have noted elsewhere,⁶⁶ students are not always aware of what they have done, either in their writing or their practice; more data is to be found in Chapter 5.

The essays analysed respond to the research questions in the following ways:

RQ1 – How do insights gained from the analysis of the short story aid the setting and assessment of writing tasks in visual arts?

There is a pronounced concentration on the formal in many and discernible structures (but not all). These may not be apparent until read, at which point a rhythm or insistent use of sounds may dominate, connecting the essay to short story delimitation and alternative media. Some of the essays used repeats and carefully contrived openers, sometimes to reinforce points, sometimes to fill space: the whimsicality of some of this fits the short story's subversive and marginal side well. There is autonomy in delimiting an essay oneself – even these square 128-word essays have been delimited to a certain extent by the writers despite the restrictions of the square: what is done *within* the square is anybody's business, and it is not hard to see it being as restrictive as a page or a canvas: the words have to go *somewhere*. Some essays used fiction or fiction techniques like switching narrator; some certainly used suggestion and the implied reader, which the short story's lack of space will probably need. There was possible varied access in one story, which connects to micro-fiction and online writing, where pages are not so clearly delimited as they are in print.

RQ2 – Do short essays encourage the kind of risk-taking that we wish to foster in visual arts students?

There was evidence of extended and sustained form / content interplay in many of the essays. There was associated play with form and grammar, and devices like punctuation used as visual markers either to reinforce points or to organise text. The risks taken were generally in subverting traditional writing, as though the students were given freedom for the day. However, destroying grammatical structure is easy: the real risks lie in the point of the essay being missed: it is so short, that the writer has to persuade the reader to work hard to mine the

⁶⁶ See 'Blah Blah Blahnik' paper, in which I mention a disjunction between what I see in some student writing and what students see in it (Appendix 7).

content, or else the essay is just a short paragraph short on content. In order to make the essays work, the writer has to compress (and has to have material to compress in the first place); the risk is that given the shortness, and given that visual arts students are conscious of form, they may relate the two leaving out the key ingredient of provisional meaning to expand the piece. The other risk is that readers may miss the point if they are not prepared to be active readers and / or may find any experimental writing tiresome. The risk has to be at the writer's behest: the writer needs to have the autonomy to decide how best to get the content across and not be told what to do or how to do it.

RQ3 – What benefits for future practice can be gained through the writing of short essays that cannot be gained through the writing of long essays?

The essays will need careful judgement, balance and editorial ability: writers need to learn to edit rather than to fill. The essays make ideas more open-ended, which, if transferred to practice, can give it life and unexpected applicability, and in this respect function like a metaphor for practice. This point, although not expressed like this, comes up repeatedly in interviews. The short essay has made some writers resourceful, and conscious of space and effect. In the examples alternative (and sometimes alternate) tones of voice were used, and alternative ways of getting the possibly reductive essay question answered. In this way, notions of what creativity are, or could be, or might be perceived by others are part of the emerging discourse. Awareness of how easy it is to misread work should come with the short essays if properly taught, because the essay becomes an object and a metaphor for practice. It does not mimic practice: this distinction is very important.

Chapter 5

Student responses

5.1 Introduction

This chapter analyses the three main methods of eliciting student responses to the essay and presentation project. The study's research questions are better answered by probing and confirming rather than making assumptions based on the project's grades and the work itself: for example, what might appear risky to me might not to the students (and vice-versa), and the 128-word essay was intended to relate to practice, a connection that should not be assumed because of grades analysis alone. This study is only concerned with the 128-word essays and will not analyse drafts and feedback from those doing the 1000-word essay (who had the same opportunity for feedback on their drafts, but were neither sent a questionnaire nor interviewed) because their function as a control group was restricted to comparison in the grades (see 4.2).

The three main methods of gathering student responses data were:

1. Draft essays;
2. Questionnaires;
3. Interviews.

These methods should yield different results: the draft essays should reveal process and development, and should also help to re-emphasise to the students the complexity of handling and extent of content I hoped for in what will have seemed an unfamiliar assignment; the questionnaires (in the form I used) should harvest more random and unexpected issue-based data; the interviews should allow more in-depth examination. This study is qualitative and the interviews are the main source of data, but the other two methods also provide insights; their differences may be useful because they can counterbalance any bias of response caused by method particularities, and triangulation between the three can help to establish whether any repeated points should be considered important themes in relation to the research questions. There was also a time-lag between the drafts / submission points and the questionnaires / interviews, and therefore student views might have been modified and opinions coagulated in the light of subsequent, unconnected work that they were doing.

5.1.2 Data gathering

The general strategy for gathering the main data – that is, the interview data – is a 'framework [...] meant to guide the analysis of data' (Bryman 2004: 399). In my case this framework was a cascade from the drafts down to the interviews via the questionnaires, building upon my own observations and reflections, and fashioning the questionnaire questions to reflect the research questions identified in 2.6. Ultimately, the longlist of

interweaving and overlapping themes were narrowed down to the four below. Bryman helpfully concedes that what I was working with – a ‘large corpus of textual material’ – is not ‘straightforward to analyze’. The sheer volume of material can be disheartening, and the urge to try to establish objective truths from very varying accounts of experiences of writing the 128-word essays should be treated with due caution: ‘qualitative research is not quantitative research with the numbers missing’ (both Bryman 2004: 398, 321). We have seen (when discussing positivism with respect to whether this study is an experiment or not – 4.2, above), that the lines dividing scientific and other forms of research are perhaps not as clearly defined as many might expect or hope, and it is important both in terms of setting up, gathering, and then evaluating data to bear this in mind.

Much qualitative research calls upon grounded theory as a prop, and the uses and nature of grounded theory are also variously understood. Cohen *et al.* confirm grounded theory’s importance as an ‘inductive [...] method of theory generation’, and both they and Bryman cite Strauss and Corbin’s definition of it as a means of deriving theory derived from data in a systematic way (2007: 491, 2004: 401). Cohen *et al.* go on to define grounded theory as ‘*emergent* rather than predefined’ (2007: 491, emphasis in original). It is tempting to dismiss this as over-complicating the issue: grounded theory means that research data has been generalized into theory (see the discussion about positivism, 4.2). Bryman tacitly goes along with this when he concedes that sometimes the term is ‘employed simply to imply that the analyst has grounded his or her theory in data’, and goes on, perhaps even more controversially, to claim that it is ‘doubtful whether grounded theory in many instances really results in theory [...] it provides a rigorous approach to the generation of concepts, but it is often difficult to see what theory, in the sense of an explanation of something, is being put forward’ (both 2004: 401, 402). The grounded theory I allude to in my Abstract and Conclusion is a gentle reworking and reapplication of Koestler’s theory of bisociation, and is based on observation and evaluation of the essays and presentations.

Much qualitative research also calls upon coding. I used no software (such as NVIVO, AntConc or WordSmith), although I did NVIVO webinar training in July 2011, so my decision not to use such software was not based on ignorance or inability to use it. I felt, however, that I would use more time programming than in reading the interviews carefully. I was also reluctant to use the software because I was looking for evidence of themes in any way that they might be expressed, as opposed to particular linguistic manifestations or phenomena, and I was mindful of Bryman’s warning that coding ‘can fragment data’, and of his second level of coding, in which he feels there is focus on interviewee language (perhaps a case for software use). My coding best conforms to Bryman’s third level because it ‘moves away from a close association with what the respondent says and towards a concern with broad analytic themes’ (citing Coffey and Atkinson 2004: 409-410).

In this respect, my approach matches that of Bryman describing the preparation of material for coding, which he sees as ‘typically’ writing marginal notes and ‘gradually refining those notes into codes’ (both 2004: 398, 409), reading the ‘transcription a number of times in order to provide a context for the emergence of specific units of meaning and themes later on’, the codes ultimately becoming the four themes below in a process of ‘delineating units of general meaning relevant to the research question: once the units of general meaning have been noted, they are then reduced to units of meaning relevant to the research question [...] clustering units of relevant

meaning [...] determining themes from clusters of meaning [and] contextualisation of meaning' (Hycner cited in Cohen *et al.* 2007: 471-472).

In addition to the three main methods, I frequently had informal conversations with students I met in the corridors. I was not one of their studio teachers, so these conversations were very specific to the essay project. Students might ask particular questions, or we might discuss the project in general terms. The conversations were useful for me because I used them to help create the questionnaire and interview questions, and to help decide whom to ask for interview.

Four main themes consistently emerge from these three data gathering methods:

- Theme 1** – **Provisional meaning**, reader-response, vagueness, ambiguity;
- Theme 2** – **Risk**, challenge, working with tradition and expectation;
- Theme 3** – **Practice parallels**, expression, frustration;
- Theme 4** – **Project process**, feedback, future applications and implementation.

These themes were not pre-set in any way (although I hoped for them and was certainly looking for them in the interviews): they emerged as a natural product of the work; of reading and re-reading the transcripts (see Bryman, above), seeking patterns and recurring themes (see Appendix 3); and of the responses gleaned from the students. The first two of these correspond closely to discrete literature review themes; the third tends to overlap between short story characteristics and visual arts academic writing (validating the short story as a model for the short essay), and the fourth overlaps between risk / autonomy and visual arts writing (validating the connection suggested in this study's hypothesis).

There are inevitable overlaps and cross-overs, even between discrete categories. For example, using provisional meaning can be a risky strategy: however, this is a deductive assumption which, although validating the connection suggested in this study's hypothesis, is best pursued in the interviews. In this chapter, I have highlighted the first, main, obvious occurrence of the theme, from which deductive assumptions may be made. The full texts of the draft exchanges, the questionnaires and the interviews, with themes highlighted throughout, can be found in Appendices 1, 2 and 3. Important points and themes are set out and discussed here. The review box comments were **not** made available to the students: they have been added for this study's analysis. Much of the analysis of the student responses will therefore be to see how the themes align with the research questions. The likely alignments are set out below, but any blurring of these in the findings will show how difficult and unwise it is to be prescriptive, and on the other that it is a rich and fertile area, ripe with diverse opportunity. The study's research questions, with most likely aligned themes, are:

RQ1 – How do insights gained from the analysis of the short story genre aid the setting and assessment of writing tasks for visual arts students?

- Themes **3, 4**

RQ2 – Do short essays encourage the kind of risk-taking that we wish to foster in visual arts students?

- Themes **1, 2, 3**

RQ3 – What benefits for future practice can be gained through the writing of short essays that cannot be gained through the writing of long essays?

- Themes [1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#)

Where links to research questions are indicated in the tables, these place the comments in the questions' *domains* and not as answers to the questions.

5.2 Feedback on draft 128-word essays

5.2.1 Introduction

In this study's experiment, I felt that the drafts could become a productive dialogue to help students form their 128-word essays from seminar points and their own ideas. I did not want the unusual format of the 128-word essay to deter the students from engaging productively with the project, nor to let them squander any enthusiasm the format might generate, by foregrounding style over content.

I found the draft exchanges useful because, unlike the questionnaires and interviews I did, they occurred whilst the work was in progress: what they lack in reflective hindsight they make up for in immediacy and immersion in process. They can help to show whether the 128-word essay students needed advice about content, writing, construction, or any combination of these, and / or whether they were worried about breaking out of their familiar writing habits (the 'comfort-zone' frequently alluded to in the literature review discussion of risk in general and sketchbooks in particular). They also demonstrate that the four themes and their links to the literature review themes and the research questions emerged *during* the project and not on reflection nor prompted by the questionnaires or interviews. This is an important point in reasserting that the themes – although hoped for – were perhaps prompted by project structure, content and over-riding data gathering strategies (particularly in the interviews) but were not the product of baldly leading questions.

The draft exchanges also indicate student autonomy when dialogue and essay development emerge, because students do not always take advice on offer in feedback. My comments usually point out weaknesses, suggesting remedies which might be a logical development of their work. In this respect, they can retain ownership of their work, develop autonomy and be prepared to take risks, because the invitation to do so (and the context and terms of the risk/s), have been sanctioned in the exchanges even if the *precise* nature of the risk has not, thus leaving them with the responsibility to make that (crucial) decision. Draft exchanges are therefore an invaluable way of documenting this process where it occurs, and of verifying whether my detection of emerging themes can be confirmed by primary evidence from participants.

5.2.2 Method

I encouraged students to email queries to me and to submit rough drafts for feedback: this is my usual practice. This was particularly important in my study because Foundation students are new to HE and not necessarily aware of the possibilities and processes of formative HE draft feedback. Feedback should not come 'after assessment', and its value must not be undermined by lateness (Catt and Gregory 2006: 19-20). In addition, there were only two weeks allowed for the essay, although again Foundation students' inexperience might make them think this was not as tight a deadline as might other students, who generally have longer deadlines in their

written work, in my experience. This means the Foundation students might have underestimated the extent of the task in hand (although some said they found the project hard: see below, and review box comments 24 and 26 in Appendix 1). The essay was set up in Microsoft Word for ease of participant access and because only base level software skills were needed, thus not favouring any one discipline over another. The file size was relatively small (1MB maximum), and easily attachable. One student did not have Microsoft Word at home, but the software is installed in all the University computers and works on both Mac and PC.

5.2.3 Findings and Discussion

I have combined the Findings and Discussion here and in the Questionnaires and Interviews sections (5.3.3 and 5.4.3 respectively) in order to avoid laboured repetition. Brewer is clear that a ‘degree of flexibility’ is necessary to make most sense of data (2007: 146); this applies here because the findings are an interpretation of exchanges (rather than the exchanges alone).

16 students engaged in email exchanges with me (46% of the 35 doing the 128-word essay). Of these, 6 simply sent an essay for comment without any further contact, or just sent the final piece well before the deadline but timed as though it were a draft, leaving 10 of the 35 actually engaging in feedback exchanges (28% of the 35). These numbers might be considered small, but, as argued above, Foundation students are new to HE and might find the practice of drafts for formative feedback unfamiliar.⁶⁸ In my experience this number is enough to form a reasonable unassessed pre-submission debate, especially given this study’s qualitative nature. If more drafts were required, then a more formal framework could have been imposed, perhaps with an assessment / evaluation point. However, although this usually generates more drafts, it frequently makes them less exploratory and more stilted because they tend to be seen as a dry-run for the assessed piece. This point relates to the discussion about sketchbooks in the literature review (2.3.3), in which work can become either a tentative version of the final piece or else so detached it makes little sense except to the maker. These drafts were meant to straddle these extremes.

The review box comments on the drafts break down reasonably comfortably into two areas:

1. Recommended student action;
2. Recognition of student achievement.

Table 1 shows summaries of the recommendations and recognitions, linking them to literature review themes and the research questions. The colour-coding of the themes has been followed through in the table to show their connection to literature review themes and the research questions. The recommendations and recognitions have been paraphrased here and occasionally combined to avoid repetition: please see Appendix 1 for the annotated full-text version. The review box comments were for this thesis and *not* sent to the students.

⁶⁸ It is worth pointing out here that in my experience at Coventry University’s School of Art and Design (and as an external examiner), opportunities for drafts are not taken up by every cohort member. I have experienced this teaching every year of the undergraduate cohort and when teaching at Masters levels (when students are well advanced in their HE careers), and when reasonable time is set aside for drafts.

Table 5.1. Links between recommendations and recognitions, literature review themes and research questions in drafts.

1. Recommended student action	Links to literature review themes	Links to research questions
Use essay form to suggest	Provisional meaning; short story's suggestive possibilities; risk (ambiguous, negotiable meaning)	RQ1, RQ2, RQ3
Don't tell us what we already know	Back away from (perhaps) familiar writing styles	RQ1, RQ2
Link form and content to create balance	Short story's 'perfect' form deflecting criticism	RQ3
Make form part of message	Short story's various delimitations	RQ1, RQ3
Emphasise content	Visual arts writing's intellectual credentials	RQ1, RQ3
Link to discipline	Visual arts academic writing; domain development and understanding through practice	RQ3
2. Recognition of student achievement	Links to literature review themes	Links to research questions
Provisional meaning	Reader-response	RQ2
Play on sound / punctuation	Subversion; short story's emphasis on form	RQ1, RQ2, RQ3
Plea for risk-taking	Autonomy, responsibility, risk	RQ2
Single-word sentence	Unusual; breaks with tradition; risky	RQ2
Use of repeats	Short story characteristics	RQ2, RQ3
Strong opening	Short story characteristics	RQ2, RQ3
Sophisticated question	Visual arts writing and intellectual credibility	RQ1
Changing argument without prompting	Intellectual confidence, autonomy	RQ1, RQ2
Finding the essay hard	Recognises scope; intellectual engagement	RQ1
Awareness of hierarchy of content and aggregate power of component parts	Responsibility; maturity; autonomous discovery; initiative	RQ1, RQ3
Self-critical; reflective	Responsibility; maturity; autonomous discovery; initiative	RQ1, RQ3

Table 5.2. Research questions' links to Themes 1 – 4.

	RQ1	RQ2	RQ3	
Theme 1	1	2	1	Total 4
Theme 2	2	4	1	Total 7
Theme 3	2	2	6	Total 10
Theme 4	5	1	2	Total 6
Total	10	9	10	

These figures are imprecise in as far as they come from my edited comments; however, in this qualitative study the figures are intended to validate trend-interpretation rather than precise quantitative data – see Bryman's comment (5.1.2, above), about qualitative research not being quantitative research with the numbers missing (2004: 321). The information here should surely be understood and accepted for what it is, and not as a pared-down version of something else. Given that the entire cohort did not respond, this data should be seen as useful insights. The occurrences of research questions are consistent - 10, 9, 10. Themes 1 (provisional meaning) and 2

(risk) link most to research question 2 (risk-taking); theme 3 (practice parallels) links most to research question 3 (benefits for future practice); theme 4 (project process) links most to research question 1 (insights gained). These make good thematic and intellectual sense, especially as each research question dominates an appropriate theme and the variations are not unexpected. The most commonly recurring theme is 3 (practice parallels), then risk in theme 2: these results very clearly support the study's hypothesis. Theme 4 (project process) might be expected to be reasonably common given the process relevance of drafts; students are generally not familiar with provisional meaning (theme 1), and only exceptionally familiar with it in any theoretical form; it may underpin much of the essay's work, but, as Harkin points out (2.4.2) it is so prevalent it hardly merits a mention: the result here is not surprising, therefore.

5.3 Questionnaires

5.3.1 Introduction

The questionnaires asked open questions, allowing students to respond ‘however they wish’ - they were not asked closed questions which gave them a ‘fixed set of alternatives from which they have to choose an appropriate answer’ (both Bryman 2004: 145). Bryman sees the advantages of open questions as fostering unusual answers produced on the responders own terms; they also respect and provide insights into responders’ ‘levels of knowledge and understanding’ (2004: 145). Open questions have disadvantages: there can be no prompting, so ambiguity must be eradicated at the outset or accepted in responses; questions might be omitted; answers have to be understood as coming from an overview of the whole questionnaire as responders can read through it all first and then start answering. None of these drawbacks was a concern for me: ambiguous answers were anticipated as this area is cognitively slippery; there were interviews to probe and prompt and to get responses from all questions. Bryman is also concerned with literacy levels and making the layout usable (2004: 135): my questions were in the body of an email with layout thus dependent on receiving software and hardware (deflecting responsibility for the layout); the questions were accessibly phrased and expandable at will, thus not pressurizing responders to write a particular amount.

5.3.2 Method

This questionnaire was sent out at the beginning of March 2012 to all Foundation students who had done the 128-word essay; around three months after the end of the essay and presentation assignments. I felt this gap would not matter because there were no other written projects or presentations that students might have confused with mine; additionally, I felt that the time-lag between the project and the request for feedback on my part would help students to be more objective about the project.

The questionnaires were sent out via Coventry University’s Moodle intranet as part of the body of the message’s text: this way there were no software clashes or other computer / access problems: to respond, students simply had to reply, expanding each answer as appropriate, or to paste the text into a Microsoft Word document. The full text of the questions is in Table 3.

5.3.3 Findings and Discussion

Only seven of the 35 students who did the 128-word essay replied, 20% of the group. The response rate may be because I misjudged the time-lag’s effect, and / or it could be because in the spring the students were probably

more bothered about their final displays and classifications than about an essay questionnaire. Although Bryman points out that a ‘great deal’ of published research is based on low response rates which should not deter researchers, he also cites Mangione’s view that response rates below 30% are unacceptable (2007: 136). Nevertheless, there is useful qualitative data in the questionnaires upon which I can build, and, furthermore, there is no supporting justification provided for Mangione’s figure: it appears quite arbitrary.

Table 3 shows summaries of student answers to the questions and my comments. These are linked to literature review themes and the research questions. The full text of each of the questionnaires is set out in the table, with its link to each research question. These links are expanded upon and explained in Appendix 2. The colour-coding of the themes has been followed through in the table to show their connection to literature review themes and the research questions. The responses / comments have been paraphrased here and occasionally combined to avoid repetition: please refer to Appendix 2, for the annotated full-text version. The comments were for this thesis and *not* sent to the students.

Table 5.3. Links between paraphrased student responses, SB comments, literature review themes and research questions in questionnaires.

Paraphrased responses and comments	Links to literature review themes	Links to research questions
1. Did you enjoy writing the-128 word essay? Yes / No (delete as appropriate) Why / why not?		RQ1
Enjoyed the challenge	Writing part of discipline short story constraints	RQ1
Kept adjusting the text	Writing part of discipline; short story crafting	RQ1, RQ3
Good to be able to pick discipline-related topic	Writing part of discipline Responsibility, autonomy = potentially risky, as can blame others less if essay goes wrong	RQ1
Challenge of constraints good	Short story delimitation and plasticity Handle constraints in personal, innovative way	RQ1, RQ2, RQ3
Expanding domain via creative argument	Creativity needs constraints; short story subverts and breaks down conventional boundaries Domain boundaries = anti-risk; practice needs to break down domain barriers to be creative; creativity = risk in this case	RQ1, RQ2
Uses studio practice terms	Writing in visual arts to bolster practice	RQ3
Creativity hard, challenging and stressful	Writing related to discipline difficulties	RQ3
Found project boring	Writing in visual arts must not relate to discipline in reductive fashion	RQ3
2. Did you find it a different experience to other essays you have done? Yes / No (delete as appropriate) Why / Why not?		RQ2
Made student feel open-minded	Transcend boundaries; autonomy and responsibility in free-thinking; risk and challenge embraced	RQ2, RQ3
Topic-related question helped	Keep domain in mind but other challenges prevent this dominating unhelpfully; short story concentration on the formal keeps this balance	RQ3
Finding words that fit well instead of making more sense	Short story constraints create provisional meaning of necessity and its 'perfect' form validates involving reader as accomplice	RQ1, RQ2
Creativity in finessing	Creativity is hard to pin down, is domain-related and inconsistently understood	RQ3
Enjoyed the project	Some enjoy creativity (others do not) – creativity futile to define, provisional meaning is thus useful	RQ3
Opportunity to experiment in this way for the first time	Creativity often understood in terms of experimentation and exploration; also in terms of creator's experience	RQ2, RQ3
3. Do you think you benefitted from writing the 128-word essay? Yes / No (delete as appropriate) Why / Why not?		RQ3
More thoughtful writer emerging	Short story emphasis on form and frequently on the right word, also implies provisional meaning Suggestion of autonomy / confidence Care in practice	RQ1, RQ2, RQ3
Link to practice	Writing to bolster and validate practice	RQ3

Unconventional language	Traditional academic writing Vague language Short story constraints > subversion; breaking boundaries; extending practice	RQ1, RQ2, RQ3
Domain boundaries blurred	Short story subversion; creative risk in domain boundary-breaking	RQ1, RQ2, RQ3
Direct connection between essay and form in visual arts practice	Visual arts writing (cf. Tonfoni) Short story emphasis on form via delimitation > plasticity in visual arts	RQ1, RQ3
Being adaptable	Creativity in adaptability; autonomy in changing approach; avoid safety of monolithic stance	RQ1
Experimented with using humour	Creativity in reconciling the disparate and the incompatible; risk in experiment, especially one which is not necessarily implied in course documentation	RQ2
4. Any other comments on the 128-word essay?		
Enjoyed the essay	Writing projects must be conscious of form	RQ1
Fitting the text into the box was a challenge	Visual arts writing (cf. Tonfoni) Challenge Crafting and persistence as in short story	RQ1, RQ2, RQ3

5.4 Student interviews

5.4.1 Introduction

The aim of these was to find out if and how the 128-word essay answered the research questions. The full, annotated text of the interviews with literature review themes and links to research questions appended and discussed is in Appendix 3.

5.4.2 Method

These interviews took place in my basement office in Coventry University's School of Art and Design, near the Foundation studios: it was familiar and, I hoped, uninhibiting. There was no paperwork, scripted questions, or complex, intimidating equipment: recording was done on a mobile phone (the first interview here is shorter than the rest because of teething troubles with the phone, which were not detected until it was too late to restart the interview).

The interviews happened one after the other, without a break (except for lunch) on Friday 9 March 2012. Each interview was scheduled to last for a maximum of 30 minutes, and this timetable was adhered to strictly. This was because to have run late would have caused me stress and Bryman is clear that stress adversely affects interviewers which can in turn adversely affect the interviews (2004: 117). Over-running would also make all subsequent interviews in that session run late, unless I were to compensate by making one interview shorter. All students invited for interview accepted: the running-order was completely arbitrary, and no student was unable to come at the appointed time, nor were any students late.

The audio files were emailed for transcription, which was done promptly. I have not edited the transcripts apart from italicising film and book titles, and redacting any names. Recording is better than taking notes during the interviews because interviewees are less likely to be distracted, and because qualitative research is often interested 'not just in *what* people say but also in the *way* that they say it' (Bryman 2004: 329). Recording also helps prevent an interviewer putting a gloss or bias on content, and recordings can be easily shared, and thus moderated and more robust (Bryman, citing Heritage (1984) 2004: 330). A mobile phone is more up-to-date than trying to write notes as questions were answered, and might thus give me a certain technological authority which might also help the students feel more confident in the whole exercise.

The mobile phone was a key factor in supporting the *type* of interviews conducted. Bryman considers semi-structured interviews to have a 'fairly clear focus, rather than a very general notion' (2004: 323); however, my interviews were quite conversational because Foundation students are at an early stage of their HE careers, and it is unwise to assume that they all have even remotely similar abilities to understand questions, absorb ideas and express themselves productively. In this respect, the interviews were nearer the *unstructured* model, with a

‘set of prompts [...] similar to a conversation’ (Bryman, citing Burgess (1984) 2000: 320-321). Because each student had been selected for different reasons, I wanted each interview’s ‘phrasing and sequencing’ to vary, as I had different emphases – although the overall themes were the same – and the need for flexibility (Bryman 2000: 545, 332) in mind for each interviewee.

At all times, I also tried to keep in mind Kvale’s (1996) list of ‘qualification criteria’ for an interviewer (cited in Bryman 2004: 325). These are (with my comments in brackets):

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Bryman also adds two criteria of his own:

1. Balanced: does not talk too much [or] too little;
2. Ethically sensitive [...] ensuring interviewee appreciates what the research is about [and] that his or her answers will be treated confidentially.

These are both fairly obvious, compared to Kvale's, which are quite probing: one naturally strives to get the best balance and to respect the ethical dimension of any interaction; additionally, I clarified at the start of each interview that the responses would be anonymised and that I had gone through the correct procedure to get ethical clearance from Coventry University. I also thanked each student at the beginning of each interview.⁶⁹

The interviewees were chosen for a variety of reasons. The most important reasons were the grades, because I wanted to talk to students who had done well in the essay but not in the presentation, and vice-versa; those who had not been inventive in the essay but had been so in the presentation; those whose 'hits the mark' grades and 'inventive' grades had a different ratio in the essay to the presentation; those whose presentation 'inventive' and 'tight' grades had different ratios; and those whose essays did not 'hit the mark' well. This was to get textured responses to the questions and not to pick over precise grades in detail, although I was interested in the step from the essay to the presentation.

My other reasons (in order of importance) for choice were to get a variety of interviewees in the terms listed below (with my fulfilment of these in brackets after each one):

1. Topics chosen – in order to ensure that the experience of writing had been the same for all, and that different interests were represented in the interviews
(At least two students had chosen each topic);
2. Those who seemed interesting in their drafts – perhaps because they appeared to struggle, or were developing their work in interesting ways, or were simply asking interesting questions
(Achieved);
3. Nationality – English not mother-tongue
(Two students were from EC countries and counted English as a second language);
4. Age – mature students chosen as well as those from expected age bracket
(There was one mature student selected);
5. Personality – reserved students invited as well as outgoing ones
(Achieved. This might seem quite a simplistic condition, and psychologically naïve, but in my experience it is a consideration staff make when selecting groups: individual tone of voice and individual students' likely engagement are considered);
6. Sex
(There were four males to six females, seven counting interview 11 – see below);
7. Those asking for draft feedback and those not
(Achieved).

⁶⁹ These do not appear at the start of every interview transcript because sometimes I made these assurances whilst getting ready to start: this means that in these cases the recorder in the phone was yet to be switched on.

The overall number of interviewees was also determined by timetabling pressures.

Interview 11 is an anomaly: this student was in the 1000-word essay group, but expressed an interest in trying the 128-word version as well. She was assessed as a 1000-word writer, but her comments are interesting because she was the only student who had experience of both formats and was therefore able to compare them.

In an echo of the earlier discussion about positivism, above, Cohen *et al.* cite Kvale's inference that interviews are a human activity, a '*flexible* tool for data collection' (2007: 349, my italic emphasis). This seems to contradict the first of Kitwood's three 'conceptions' of an interview, which is that the interview is about 'pure information transfer'. However, he also sees that process as being 'inevitably' subject to bias, and that bias should not be controlled but a 'theory of everyday life that takes account of the relevant features of interviews' should be constructed, which presumably tolerates bias (all Cohen *et al.* 2007: 349-50). There are also social factors, interpersonal tensions perhaps leading to withheld confidence and relative opacity of meaning which will be difficult to bring within the compass of systematic handling because of the 'constraints of everyday life' (Cicourel, cited in Cohen *et al.* 2007: 350). This faintly defeatist concession is at least reassuringly realistic, and may well help data collection stay as flexible as possible to be efficient and worthwhile.

If data is to be valid, then bias in the interview – which will be generally caused by the interviewer's and respondent's 'characteristics', the content of the questions, mutually diverging expectations, misunderstandings and preconceived notions – must be minimized (Cohen *et al.* 2007: 150). Oppenheim's list of causes of bias (cited in Cohen *et al.* 2007: 151) read more like the result of carelessness (for example non-adherence to instructions, inconsistent use of wording, poor use of support materials, changes in question sequences) than bias in any intellectual and / or personal sense, and it is worth remembering that research is 'far from a neat, clean, tidy, unproblematic and neutral process, but [is] shot through with actual and potential sensitivities' (Cohen *et al.* 2007: 131).

Bryman describes a scenario in which the questioning was much too open, and thus lacked specificity (2004: 148). Closed questions – which, together with open questions, are generally in the province of the questionnaire – have useful and consistent specificity, but they can have limited scope and range as well, and can irritate respondents if they struggle to find applicability in the questions (Bryman 2004: 150). Open questions may be more correct and proper, in that they give respondents room to manoeuvre, but they are vulnerable to unhelpfully varying responses. However, this variability itself may be what the researcher is after, and to an extent this is true in my study: the students needed varying degrees of prompting, and it was interesting to see how aware they were of how their essays might be read.

The students in my survey were new to HE, and were new to many of the terms, critical angles, theories and layered meanings that even students further up struggle with. Some of the advice on interviewing children is pertinent: trust needs to be established, children get easily distracted, the interview needs to be quick and relevant, interviewees can be 'inarticulate, hesitant and nervous', try to get genuine data rather than data about the interview situation, be careful about language register, 'overcome children's poor memories', keep focus but

do not get becalmed (Bailey, Breakwell, Lewis, McCormick and James, Simons cited in Cohen *et al.* 2007: 375-376). Cohen *et al.* disclose that problems interviewing children in some cases apply equally to adults (2007: 376), and this matters because attempting to overcome these problems can lead to bias which, although almost certainly benignly unintentional, might be argued as undermining the data's reliability.

In particular, some of the questions in my study's interviews may seem leading and some of the questions are longer than answers: this was because of efforts to induct the students into the intellectual zone of the study, to 'be able to clarify, confirm and modify the participants' comments with the participant' (Kvale, cited in Cohen *et al.* 2007: 154), to be completely clear that the students meant what they said, given that the landscape was unfamiliar and that they were moving hesitantly through it. There is a suggestion that some interviewees feel demeaned to be interviewed by someone of 'lower status or less power' (Cassell, cited in Lee, cited in Cohen *et al.* 2007: 152), and I wanted the students to feel relaxed and in the usual student / tutor relationship, especially as these Foundation students will probably not have had enough time at the University⁷⁰ to develop confidently individualised interactions with their tutors. This meant taking charge of the interviews.

Not all researchers dismiss the leading question out of hand, however. Cohen *et al.* 'are not necessarily suggesting that there is not a place for them', and they cite Kvale making a 'powerful case' for them. Although discussing police interviews, they argue that leading questions 'may be used for reliability checks with what the interviewee has already said' (all 2007: 151). In my study, 'what the interviewee has already said' could be seen as the texts of the essays. I wanted to check the motive behind the writing: for example, whether the students had intended to use suggestion as much as they appeared to do, whether that suggestion *was* suggestion (i.e. intentional and controlled ambiguity) and not just sloppy writing, whether they were confident that readers appreciate being made to think for themselves, whether they were frustrated by any lack of content, whether they had really said what they wanted to say, whether they were confident that any departure from norms and expectations of essay writing as they had experienced them to date might be received in the same spirit in which they were executed, and whether these departures were done to maximise content rather than just to profit from a chance to do something different. It would clearly be impractical to list every emerging theme here, but the point is made: in the time available for the interviews – research commentators are aware that 'interviewing can be stressful for interviewers', and that duress can lead to mistakes (Bryman 2004: 117) – I needed to get to the point, as argued above.

Finally, I needed to consider the ethical dimension of the interviews (and of the other methods of response data retrieval, the questionnaires and the draft feedback exchanges). Ethical clearance was sought for analysing primary and unpublished data; for collecting data other than that in the public domain; for not being completely sure that I could obviate the possibility of student identification; for the retention of unanonymised data. Students were permitted, naturally, to withdraw from the data gathering (although not from the essays / presentation in that they were part of their course). Of Cohen *et al.*'s extensive list (2007: 382-83) of ethical considerations, there are no issues that have not been covered in the ethical clearances obtained through the

⁷⁰ The essays were done in November 2011, only two months after students enrolled, although the interviews took place in March 2012, six months after students enrolled.

normal channels when undertaking this research at Coventry University. Specific concerns raised in the list can be answered thus: informed consent was obtained (orally); information was given out in advance; the possible consequences of the research (that there might be more experimental writing projects in future) were made clear; potential harmful effects were obviated; possible benefits (to practice and to practice-related writing) have been articulated; the reciprocity between participants' giving and receiving has been equalised as much as possible (the project was quite short, the presentations part of their usual practice, the whole intervention was co-ordinated with related coursework, the grading did not affect students' final outcome); participants' names have been redacted and minimal reference to their work has been made in the interviews, so it would be very hard for anyone other than I to tell who is who; the conduct of the interviews was done in my office – a familiar space and with other students nearby, in order to obviate discomfort and / or duress; the data is not really sensitive in any way: personal details, proclivities, habits, tastes, disabilities etc. are not discussed at all.

The ethical questions arising out of interviews and research / researcher bias understandably lead into the ethical questions surrounding insider research and its consequent intellectual credentials. As the subject expert and the students' tutor, it did not seem unnatural either to me or to them that I should be working with them on a 'project'. None expressed surprise, nor any outward emotion other than in some a clear willingness to cooperate – none was reluctant to cooperate. My teaching was not being scrutinised, nor compared to a colleague's teaching, nor was my style of teaching or its idiosyncrasies of interest: I have my personal touches, as does any teacher or researcher. To a certain extent, my presence should have given authority to the project: I have noted unease amongst students at all levels in the past when new staff appear unexpectedly, and I have delivered essays and the teaching surrounding essays to Foundation students since 2007. This was emphasised to the students at the beginning of the year at my usual introduction to the cohort by myself and the main Foundation studio staff, and also, presumably, by unavoidable student interactions with former Foundation students who have progressed onto other courses within and outwith the institution. Indeed, it may have seemed *less* natural to the students concerned – if arguably more likely to obviate any bias, the presence of which I would in any case dispute – were I *not* to have carried out this research. I have striven for neutrality where possible and appropriate in order to control variables.

Bryman notes that a researcher is 'never conducting an investigation in a moral vacuum – who he or she is will influence a whole variety of presuppositions that in turn have implications for the conduct of social research', and by this one might infer that to introduce another researcher might correct one potential fault in the methodology whilst creating another. Bryman seems to endorse this when he continues that 'one hears increasingly less frequently claims that social research can be conducted in a wholly objective, value-neutral way' (both 2004: 517). With regard to the question of external validity – presumably the aim of reducing researcher subjectivity and context-specific familiarity – Bryman clearly feels it is more the 'realm of quantitative [than qualitative] research' (2004: 30). Even so, he later concedes that whilst quantitative research is 'sometimes depicted as committed to objectivity [...] it is not at all clear that nowadays this principle is as widely endorsed among quantitative researchers as qualitative researchers would have us believe' (2004: 517). This throws up some interesting issues: it suggests that qualitative researchers do not fully understand current quantitative research; it suggests that qualitative researchers do not understand the objective possibilities of

subjectivity, typically seen as *their* domain; it suggests that the boundaries between qualitative and quantitative research are blurring; it indicates a relaxation in the insistence on objectivity, either because subjectivity is valued as a partner for objectivity, or because pure objectivity is seen as unachievable.

Bryman points out, with regard to action research, that the ‘investigator becomes part of the field of study’ (2004: 277), but he also insists, reassuringly, that the ‘process of analysis is one that means that the results are not an extension of the analyst and his or her personal biases’. He is discussing content analysis here, but the aspiration must be the same in my case, particularly as Bryman continues: ‘the rules in question may, of course, reflect the researcher’s interests and concerns and therefore these might be a product of subjective bias, but the key point is that, once formulated, the rules can be (or should be capable of being) applied without the intrusion of bias’ (both 2004: 182). This relates back to the questions, above, of predeterminism with regard to hypotheses (which will presumably come from personal / subjective sources) and generalizability (which is a precept of scientific research). In this sense there is intellectual robustness in a scheme which intelligently deploys the best of subjectivity and of objectivity. Cohen *et al.* neatly bring this back round to action research when they cite Kemmis and McTaggart’s view that action research is ‘research by particular people on their own work, to help them improve what they do, including how they work with and for others’ (2007: 298).

5.4.3 Findings and Discussion

The interviews are transcribed and set out verbatim (apart from names’ redacting) in Appendix 3. The transcripts have been thoroughly examined, and references, either direct or indirect, to the four main themes emerging have been highlighted according to the colour-coding used throughout. This Appendix is therefore the main discussion of the findings – it is laborious and thorough, far too long to reproduce in the main body of the thesis and too repetitive to discuss in quotations here.

Instead, I have summarised the main findings into those suggesting literature review themes and those illuminating research questions. The main source interview number appears in brackets after each reference below to make cross-reference possible. The colour-coding in the interview transcripts referred to above is yet another filter over the interpretation of the material, and adds texture.

Literature review themes – Visual arts academic writing – traditional writing gives authority and credibility (5, 8, 10); visual arts writing agenda unclear (4); Tonfoni (3, 4); Tonfoni and mimicry of the visual instead of a cognate alternative (4, 8, 10); writing to improve practice and not to *look like* practice (10);

Literature review themes – Risk, challenge, creativity, autonomy – Koestler and reconciling opposites (1, 11); creativity hard to define (1, 4, 9); domain-breaking and risk (3, 6); von Clausewitz and autonomy (3); risk must not involve absolutes (3) and is hard to quantify (5, 7, 8, 9); risk can be sanctioned by provisional meaning to prevent misunderstanding, if that is what is wanted (6); the paradox of risk, in which once allowed and institutionalised it becomes safe (8); sketchbooks – risk – must not be pedestals (10); risk can only thrive in a

risk-free environment, the paradox again (10); creativity, risk and the length of an essay are comparative- and context-dependent, like vague language (10);

Literature review themes – Provisional meaning – suggestion a key factor (2); Harkin's view that reader-response is the norm (2, 3, 7, 9); vague language creates communities as well as thriving in them (3); Cook and Milton's *Paradise Lost* as stabilisers of provisional meaning (7); the implied reader and provisional meaning (8, 9); vague language and the sophistication it might call for (9); avoid absolutes of form (10);

Literature review themes – The short story – abdication of responsibility (1); compression (2); licence to experiment (2, 3); form of the marginal (3); needs context, and thus comparative, see above **risk** (4, 6); delimitation (4, 6, 8, 9); repeats, the use of sound and the link between delimitation and other interpretations of form (5, 6, 8); use of suggestion does not diminish quality (5); truncation v. compression (6, 11); shortness does not diminish content (7); not intended to prevent curiosity (7).

RQ1 – How do insights gained from the analysis of the short story aid the setting and assessment of writing tasks in visual arts? – Challenge of the format (1, 8); making things fit – this cross-refers to Koestler – (1); short story's perfect form (1); short story compresses (2, 11); subversive (2); concision (2); provisional meaning (2, 9); connects with practice (agenda (3, 4); form / content interface (3); persuasive / subversive / marginal (3, 4); breaking rules helps to appreciate them (3); needs suggestion (3); delimitation (4, 9, 10); imposes controls but liberates by so doing (3); form / rhetoric / tone of voice / sound (4, 9); repeats (5); suggestion does not mean poor quality (5); works with form to create meaning...becomes an object (5); provisional meaning and community of readers (6, 8); intent in content (6); link to practice via appreciation of the formal (6); it opens - unlike Tonfoni – not closes, even though it's so small (7); use whatever works, be resourceful (8); implied reader (8); persuasion does not need explanation (9); provisional meaning is not sloppy – it makes writers have to be *more* careful (10); what *is* short?...connects with delimitation (11); do not let the project's radicalism cancel out any risk...connects with delimitation, suggestion and subversion (11);

RQ2 – Do short essays encourage the kind of risk-taking that we wish to foster in visual arts students? – challenge, new territory (1, 2, 4, 8, 9); autonomy (1, 3, 5); intelligent risk (2); pride (2); risk involved (2, 3); confident expression and insight (3); vague language: does it really create communities...that is the risk (3); inspires risk (3, 4, 5); risk of actually saying nothing (4); risk not reductively defined or understood (5); risk and reader-response combine (5); form legitimises risk (5); provisional meaning sanctions risk (6); fun – engagement – essential for autonomy (6); domain-breaking (6); risk in presentation and not the essay (7); risk as self-respect and not conforming to pressure, even to take a risk (8); views on creativity very varied (10); sketchbooks need to work (10); risk thrives in a risk-free environment (10); Koestler, reconciling difficulty and challenge = creativity? (10, 11); convention: why is grammar often the first casualty of radical writing? (11);

RQ3 – What benefits for future practice can be gained through the writing of short essays that cannot be gained through the writing of long essays? – precision (in the broadest sense – a piece of work might be deliberately and carefully inaccurate) and fit are visual arts qualities (1, 2, 3); invention (1); general practice

links (1, 2, 3, 4, 5); intelligent design work (1); forced to think in novel way (2, 4); demanding and stimulating (2); enriches practice (2); essay *needs* practice link (3); practice governed by constraint (3); enjoyment an essential part of practice (3); feedback and dialogue between staff and student needs careful planning (4, 8); timing matters (5); reflection on content resulted in formal device (6); ideas of what creativity *is* – and *could* be – critical (6); it is different writing and not adapted writing (6); makes practice look outwards (6); concentration on form and content (6); stepping-stone to next important project (7, 10); philosophical dimension of what a restriction could be, connects with constructive delimitation (7); even if students hate writing, without any prospect of changing their minds – at least this is short (8); tradition – do not dispense with this thoughtlessly (8, 10); sound, rhythm, rhetoric and other formal devices can make project more inclusive (9); treat essays as studio work (10); keep project new and changing – avoid absolutes (10); be cognate and do not mimic (10); implied reader and provisional meaning part of brief, and teaching (10); sanctioning autonomy reduces it (11); avoid the self-referential (11).

5.5 Conclusion

There were no particular patterns of student types who engaged with drafts, did not engage with them or only partially did so, in the sense that those who submitted drafts did not necessarily get high grades, and neither was the reverse true. This reflects my experience both at Coventry University and as an external examiner; however, attendance, participation with formative feedback and draft protocols are areas and concerns of their own, beyond the province of this study. The most important factors emerging from these drafts are the gratifying levels of student engagement in terms of enthusiasm, maturity and sophistication; the willingness to explore (risk-implicitly); and the coherent links between the four themes and the research questions. These demonstrate validity in the study's hypothesis and method. Although these findings do not come from the whole cohort, data was evenly available from those who *did* submit drafts, so these responders might represent the whole group as much as they might not.

Two students responded in questionnaires that they did not enjoy the 128-word essay.⁷¹ However, both then continued to report positive feedback in the remaining questions, and this demonstrates the complex interweaving of themes in this study and the folly of trying to categorise responses too neatly. Table 3 demonstrates this as well, although Table 4 also shows that each research question's occurrence in relation to its principally linked questionnaire question is reasonably consistent: the pale blue boxes show proportions ranging from 42% to 36% with an average of 37%. As was made completely clear in relation to Table 3, above, these figures are intended to indicate trends and overlaps, not precise quantitative data.

Table 5.4. Research question occurrence in relation to associated questionnaire question. The table's data is arranged thus: in Questionnaire question 1, the total number of research questions suggested was 12, and their distribution amongst specific research questions was 5, 2, 5, making 12 total. This applies to the rest of the questions in other columns. The total number of research questions suggested was 39, and the table shows the research questions' distribution amongst these: 13, 10, 16, making 39 total.

Questionnaire question	RQ1	RQ2	RQ3
1	5 / 12	2 / 12	5 / 12
2	1 / 9	3 / 9	5 / 9
3	5 / 14	4 / 14	5 / 14
4	2 / 4	1 / 4	1 / 4
Total	13/39	10/39	16/39

All questionnaire respondents found it different to other essays, all felt that they had benefitted, even the two who disliked the project. The point of the exercise was not just to find out whether it was popular, although that is important: it was to see how themes emerge and research questions are addressed by the project, and in this respect there is considerable material here for future application.

⁷¹ Please refer to Appendix 2 for full text; the students in question are nos 2 and 7.

The interviews are very consistent: all students found the essay an enjoyable challenge with discernible links to practice beyond the topic in the question. The four main themes – provisional meaning, risk, practice parallels and project process – were first identified in these interviews because this was the first data to be evaluated, and they recur evenly throughout the interviews, and it is not unreasonable to assert that they occur, albeit in less well-defined ways, in the drafts and questionnaires. Literature review themes were only ever whispered during interviews and research questions never mentioned at all, so the interesting cross-overs between all these three ways of understanding the data are textured overlaps that crush out extraneous matter. Despite the variety of essays submitted, students' experiences and reactions were very positive and similar. One student clearly failed to engage wholeheartedly with the essay – but did so with the presentation, and without prompting from me. This student therefore perhaps the most interesting: the essays were never meant to be evaluated as writing but as stepping-stones to the next project, the presentations – in this case the essay has done what was asked of it.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

This study asked if writing can enhance visual arts practice: the answer clearly is yes – if grades are the only measure. These unequivocally showed that the grades of the 128-word essay writers were better than those of the 1,000 word essay writers. However, the differences between the groups were slight – nuanced, even – and, were the results of the study to be based on quantitative grades alone, it would be foolish to close off the data gathering after one year.

Many factors might have given rise to the grades (and these factors may equally *change* grading patterns in subsequent experiments), for example:

Size of cohort

(Inter-student communications, which might have led students to compare their work, or to feel (de)motivated, either by the assignment itself, its future connection to a presentation, the prospect of a presentation, their allocation to whichever group they had – these kinds of misgivings can be aggravated by Facebook discussions and / or other fora. Sometimes the size of a group can mean that splinter-groups naturally form, and such splinter-groups can unwittingly persuade individuals in or out of modes of response to tasks);

Inclinations of individuals

(There may have been a bias – even a latent one – towards writing and / or presentations in the individuals of one group: it is very hard, if not impossible, when selecting groups randomly, to be able to detect such inclinations);

Abilities of individuals

(Some may like writing more than others, some may be better and more confident than others at presentations);

External factors

(The research may seem utterly unnecessary and trivial to some students were the economic climate to deteriorate even more);

Novelty value

(It was the first time I had done something like this, and the students were aware that they were part of an experiment);

Context

(Other, coeval studies / projects, external events / *zeitgeist*).

If grades were to be the major factor, then a longitudinal study, taking account of the above, would be necessary; perhaps a sister study at a comparable institution at the same time might be set up so that any local factors could be identified and factored in (for example, reputation / atmosphere of institution, which *may* not be as apparent to researchers in their own institution as it might be when another is introduced into the study, and

which might encourage students to work / react in a particular way). The ‘unequivocal’ data is, therefore, unequivocal as a snap-shot, but the snap-shot is unreliable and should be treated with a degree of scepticism.

A researcher should thus be wary of assuming that these grades are replicable. Nevertheless, much university course development *is* based on simple module figures of student passes, means, medians and standard deviation, for example, and is often, in my experience, based on one or perhaps two cohorts in successive years rather than systematic analysis of extensive numerical data. In this respect, the quantitative data in my study *is* reliable, because I was insistent that there should be nothing unusual about group selection, room / equipment allocation, seminar delivery and handouts: these latter, for example, being the kind of support material I would publish on *any* similar project. Therefore the set-up of the experiment adequately responded to norms upon which decisions regarding course development and innovation can be based, as I have experienced them, and if one were looking for a simple experiment to determine which essay format might be a better preparation for a presentation, then the figures provided might persuade one to implement the short essay, particularly as it was different and largely enjoyable. However, this is not rigorous enough for a study of this nature, where more textured and probing analysis is needed. Bryman adds a sobering coda to this conclusion by commenting that regardless of strategy, the data alone is not enough: ‘your work can acquire significance only when you theorize in relation to it [...] you are not there as a mere mouthpiece’ (2004: 411).

The main source of data in this study, therefore, was the qualitative data – the drafts, the questionnaires and the interviews. As has been stated above (4.2), the *experience* of the 1,000-word essay writers was not important: their assignment was no different to conventional essay assignments given to visual arts students at this level. It may have been interesting to know if they felt envious of those doing the 128-word version, but we have seen that some art and design students are reluctant to countenance ‘creative writing’ (2.6). We might also conjecture that some visual arts students’ respect for traditional writing might reverse the Hawthorne Effect, in that they might feel patronised by a customised writing project that appears, on the surface, to offer and demand less than they might expect at university, and students might accordingly try *less* hard in the 128-word version or make *more* effort in the 1,000-word version (there is some anecdotal evidence to support this: in 2012-13, I ran a second, similar essay project with the next Foundation cohort, and there was noticeably more bemusement than in the year of *this* study’s experiment). We have seen, in the questionnaires, that some students who felt that the 128-word version was demanding did not enjoy the project, and it may be that they felt that their efforts were being misdirected and would be better applied to their practice and a conventional essay, which they might feel they could better integrate into their ongoing work. In these cases, Foundation students might have been the wrong choice for this study, because their relative inexperience at university might mean that they are suspicious of experimental work, and are keen to do more familiar work until they become more secure.

The interviews revealed that students enjoyed the 128-word essay, found it a challenge, and unwittingly alluded to the four themes of provisional meaning, risk, practice parallels and project process which I identified – in various forms – when reading the transcripts. However, these themes were not truly or spontaneously articulated in the majority of cases: they needed a fair amount of teasing out, and in this respect were similar to the latent themes of literary criticism identified in ‘Blah Blah Blahnik’ (Appendix 7). This questions whether any

achievements in the essay were transferable or not, or if they were, to what extent? Was anything learned or gained by the writing of the 128-word essay in any way useful as an enhancer of practice? The question is largely unanswerable, except by the quantitative grades, whose (un)reliability is discussed, above. In this respect, an unapologetic and rigorous quantitative study might be the best way to approach this kind of research in future. At least grades are the currency of much university innovation, and qualitative interviews offer insights, but these, too, can be unreliable: students might change their minds, they might feel intimidated or inhibited, they may say what they think interviewers want to hear, they may not understand, they may feel that any evidence should come in the work, and the work's quality is expressed in the form of grades.

The study's methodology could be improved – made more telling, perhaps, but certainly bigger – if *all* students did both versions of the essay at some point, with suitable practical work following up. There could be much more comprehensive grading, and interviews to probe reactions: the four themes are perhaps too latent to celebrate as emerging themes and might be best left as a tacit framework. Union is a key concept, best exemplified by Koestler's idea that creativity is a reconciliation of the mutually irreconcilable, and recurs, albeit in different forms, throughout the study and in the interviews in particular. Given that many attempts at defining creativity either give up or resort to cheap platitudes like 'invention' or 'passion for imagination', Koestler's idea is at least measurable and appreciable. Some work in class on definitions might have been useful, especially if accompanied by studies of subversion, ekphrasis, parallel yet applicable endeavour such as imagist poetry, W. J. T. Mitchell's iconology ('images [...] understood as a kind of language', 1986), co-writing, fiction, text messages, social media and intranet exchanges.⁷² The potential for fun perhaps needs more explicit articulation and demonstration, but as we have seen in the Introduction, university is now a serious business. However, it was very important also that students were left to their own devices so they could express themselves autonomously.

The research questions have been answered at many points in the main text, but it may be useful to provide summary answers:

RQ1 – How do insights gained from the analysis of the short story aid the setting and assessment of writing tasks in visual arts?

The short story's concentration on form, delimitation, subversion, provisional meaning via suggestion make it a good model;

RQ2 – Do short essays encourage the kind of risk-taking that we wish to foster in visual arts students?

Provided we can agree on what risk should be, and do not impose it on students (at which point it is no longer a risk), then the answer is 'yes';

RQ3 – What benefits for future practice can be gained through the writing of short essays that cannot be gained through the writing of long essays?

⁷² There is a precedent here which might be used as an inceptive model: I designed, implemented and published an online writing and design project for Coventry University's intranet in 2002. It produced very interesting, unexpected and imaginative results, and was successful with the students. I have given papers and staff workshops on this kind of work at Falmouth College of Arts, Glasgow School of Art and Design and Wolverhampton University. See *The Nightmare Brief*, under 'Collaborating with Communities' (pp. 54-58), in *Learning Environments & Pedagogy: A Series of Institutional Case Studies*, published by the LTSN (Learning and Teaching Support Network) Generic Centre in 2003.

It acts as a metaphor for practice instead of mimicking it or analysing it.

However, these answers need some expansion, some qualification and some caution. With respect to the claim that the short essay can be a metaphor for practice, the following QAA statement is pertinent: ‘the study of art and design has always provided a vocational outlet for creative endeavour. In a world that is becoming culturally more sophisticated and requires greater innovation and challenge, the cognitive abilities and practical skills of artists and designers are in increasing demand’ (The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2008: 2). This could be read as both inspirational and unnerving: inspirational because of its promises, unnerving because of the uncompromising uncertainty of such promises. Does it mean that artists and designers have to produce more of the same, or does it mean that artists and designers have to increase the standards and sophistication of their work to satisfy this ‘culturally more sophisticated’ world, or does it mean both? And if both, are both required in equal measure, or is some formulaic balancing between the two needed, perhaps becoming an assessable or quantifiable creative act in itself, in some ersatz-Koestlerian fashion?

The statement, surely well-intentioned, is nonetheless peerlessly bland and appears to ignore contemporary poststructuralism, Barry’s ‘universe of radical uncertainty’ (2002: 61). ‘Radical uncertainty’ could at least offer some succour, some sanctuary because of the inferred and positive absence of rules and regulations (‘positive absence’ itself a feast for postmodern gourmands), although we have seen that an absence of rules can itself be unnerving (2.3). Even if an escape route via Barry’s postmodern poststructuralism *were* countenanced, practitioners would be too late, according to Kirby, who predates the QAA statement by stating that ‘postmodernism is dead and buried. In its place comes a new paradigm of authority and knowledge formed under the pressure of new technologies and contemporary social forces’ (2006). Docx follows this by declaring postmodernism dead in 2011 (at the moment the Victoria & Albert Museum Postmodernism exhibition opened). He argues that new ideas of ‘specificity, of values and of authenticity, are at odds with postmodernism’ and that we should countenance calling them the ‘Age of Authenticism’ (2011). His view could be argued to chime with Kirby’s, and the apparent differences between their terms might be reconciled thus: ‘specificity’ could be wed with ‘new technologies’, ‘values’ with ‘social forces’ and ‘authenticity’ with ‘contemporary’. Of course neither Kirby nor Docx has been proved to be right, although Docx adds a coda to his suggestion, above, ‘[let’s] see how we get on’ (2011), which is masterful in its reticent insistence.

Whilst it is not within the province of this thesis to discuss the status of postmodernism or poststructuralism, it is surely clear that the *zeitgeist* is unstable, and this instability might be seen as an opportunity, a threat, or both – and an artist or designer should reserve the right to dictate the weighting of the components of any such combination, and indeed the permanence of any such combination (see 2.3, and with particular reference to Koestler in 2.3.3). Where does this leave the contemporary artist or designer? If the replacement for an uncertain world is debatable, then uncertainty still rules. The examples of work analysed in Chapter 3 are posited as examples of how visual arts practice demonstrates risk-taking as *it* is embodied in short story characteristics as *they* are analysed in the literature review: the purpose here is to demonstrate that, by extension, writing in the form of short essays can equally be a metaphor for visual arts practice if seen through the same filters.

For example, the painting *Portrait of a Young Woman* has been shown to have possible multiple messages, a practice which I argue should now be seen as artful rather than indecisive if the painting is to thrive in the face of the QAA's message. However, this is a contemporary reading, answering the conditions I have set out above and not necessarily those of the period of the painting's creation. Malins feels that subjective responses to art are deepened by 'knowledge', and that a way to get this knowledge is to understand factors such as compositional 'basic grammar' (1980: 10-11, 9). Compositional grammar is helped by factors such as mathematics and the golden section (Kent, 1995, and Henning, 1983), aimed at achieving and maintaining 'visual principles' (Henning 1983: 87) – a more inflammatory term for 'factors' and 'principles' here might be 'rules' (but see 2.3.4). These points seem to be aimed at clarity: as Henning points out, somewhat portentously, a 'picture unclear in concept and lacking the support of a functioning composition' is useless (1983: 12).

Henning, of course, is right in two ways: clearly intended meaning surely needs to be clearly conveyed (as does unclear meaning if it is not to be confused with clear meaning by an eager audience), but multiple meaning – in the reader-response sense (2.4.2) also needs the support of a functioning composition. Kent edges towards this, perhaps unintentionally, when she says that 'asymmetry [...] requires a subtle balancing act [...] if the imbalance is to appear interesting rather than awkward' (1995: 14), and Henry James explains that he balances interests on either side of a character to make sure she 'hovers, inextinguishable' (1976: xiii). James means his readers do some work: the character has eternal life, in the same way that the painting, *Portrait of a Young Woman*, has multiple possible meanings in contemporary readings as opposed to being well-made to read perfectly in one, exclusive way.

The short essays could also be read in many ways – their repeats, spaces, typographic quirks, for example, all aiming for some kind of formal integrity forced upon them by the uncompromising format and specious (because random) restrictions, are more visible and perhaps more important in such a small canvas. Ideally, they deflect criticism of meaning (and thus certainty of meaning – commitment) in the same way as Cutting's man at work (2.4.3), and the short essay's gaps are crucial. Ideally, these are a kind of hybrid of Huckin's silences and Iser's blanks – they are omissions, in the sense that there might be more text but cannot be because of the essay's severe restrictions and insistence on a longer essay's content, but the gaps do not necessarily have one meaning, because the form of the essay has licensed more. The reader is presumably on hand to fill in the gaps – but of course may not oblige: this is the risk.

It is not specifics of form that matter, nor is it specifics of interlocking of form, content and effect that matter, nor is it domain-connections or discipline parallels (for example the use of narrative to guide readers / viewers around a composition) that matter, nor is it physicality of form that matters (we have seen that the short story's length is very variable). A union of form and content is too easy and self-indulgent – in that it sells the burgeoning target audience short – in a contemporary setting, and it might be reasonably argued that a union of form and *intent* is the ideal, with content the key variable and intent the dependent variable. This is especially hard in visual arts practice if content is read as provisional, which I have demonstrated it to be in my examples: the metaphor is a palliative in this hardship, useful in what it *does* as opposed to what it *is*.

The problem is less a matter of persuading anybody that short essays can be metaphors than of getting them to see this in the first place and then knowing what to do about it. Any significance of these essays is thus questioned either as a discrete project (e.g. was it enjoyable, did it stimulate?), or as a connected project (forget what you did and how it was received, but think: has this changed the way you work?). I have made much of the short essays' transferability, but I cannot truthfully claim this has happened because of their format: too much else is variable, and more time is needed. The fallout of an essay project such as mine may not be felt for some time, in the same way that some alumni have confided to me that they found their dissertations useful, but not until after they had left the University. This leads me to question whether students' writing projects should be seen as formative or summative, thus questioning *when* writing projects should be implemented: if dissertations were second year projects, might there be a better chance of applying the learning? Yes, if timing is the issue.

The study also claims to evaluate the short essays as metaphors, as objects, which in a sense they have become (but not in any way that Tonfoni would recognise). The grading of the essays was done in a novel – in my experience – way, with an evaluation of what the essay achieved (as opposed to what it contained), and an evaluation of how it had done this (but this did not affect the essay's effectiveness), and as there was no overall grade, students could inspect the workings of their essays more intimately. In addition, I claim to have induced a supporting theory that 'absolutes and variables need careful balance, extending the bisociative notion of mixing tradition with innovation' (from the abstract of this study). This is because so much of this study's focus is on risk and provisional meaning, and these are both so unreliable and badly understood – indeed, perhaps unreliable *because* badly understood. We have seen how risk is remorselessly and routinely expected of visual arts students by those who may be perceived as being immune to it, and we have seen that provisional meaning should really be very fixed, not fuzzy, but one of a suite of meanings on offer. We have seen that visual arts students' perceptions of writing are textured, unexpected and inconsistent; that innovations in assignments need an anchor; that risk and absolutes have a symbiotic, if mutually exclusive, relationship; that objectivity might be more risky than subjectivity; that writing might in fact have been wrongly assigned as an agent of credibility to visual arts courses, thus suggesting an outlet as *part* of practice instead of – or as well as – a *support* for practice; that the link between critical writing and better practice is *still* unproven; that vague language might not be so vague after all, its short cuts and contextual consensus questionably effective; and that precision might, like objectivity, be riskier than imprecision, whatever any documentation or learning outcomes might say (in other words, if precision is asked for, then imprecision is a risk); and we have seen, crucially, that the short story should really be judged as a short story and not as a compressed version of a long one, any more than a family car should be judged in sports car terms: it needs to be judged by how well it does what it sets out to do. However, once its aim is uncertain, all sorts of risk come into play, as we have seen.

These examples, above, show that the zone in which this study is located is very unstable. Risk can be folded back upon itself, and is very hard to grade. My supporting theory is in line with Koestler's bisociation, and argues that variables emerging from these unreliable phenomena, above, can only be made meaningful if they are combined with one being grounded: thus the short essay gave students a completely open brief in response to a general and provocative statement, but asked them to do it within very tight restrictions. This, too, makes

the endeavour more measurable for those outside the work (i.e. tutors), and even if the essays are not be graded, at least there is a rallying point around which discussions can begin – an open brief risks caution.

The study asked research questions about risk as a way of demonstrating relevance: but both risk and relevance are subjective, and generally seen by staff and students (or practitioner and colleague, client or co-worker) from opposite perspectives: seldom the same perspective. And why should they? Once the perspectives coincide, then relevance is consensual and risk is presumably negated, unless both staff and student decide on a common purpose for a risk. There are risks that could thrive under these conditions, but these tend to be experiments with new techniques, and risk wasting time, materials and patience. In addition, what evidence is there that risk makes work better (if better can be defined)? Much successful and respected creative practice thrives on following a formula, the ‘signature style’ which cynics might call the first sign of atrophied stasis.

Nevertheless, the study was very successful, enjoyed by the majority of students and appreciated by support staff. The study’s essays *did* answer the main question: writing *can* be useful to visual arts practice (if students say it is); aside from in-depth interviews such as I conducted, there is little else in a qualitative study to build upon apart from localised evidence such as grades and ancillary projects such as were done, but these are supporting evidence. Risks *were* taken, articulated and enjoyed, the challenge *was* appreciated and almost without exception *not* avoided. There is evidence in the presentation grades of differences that *might* be because of the short essay: however, in order to be able to confirm lasting success, the study would need a longitudinal, iterative, action research version. Some of the essays are outstanding, particularly when the level of the students is considered, and many of their interview comments and reflections show fascinating insight and promise.

What risk did the students run when writing the 128-word essay? They were using familiar materials; they could write; they understood the subject matter; the audience (me) was broadminded; the essay was short; it cost nothing; they could choose the topic. However, all those interviewed found it challenging, even if they did not like it or enjoy it, and although this study sets some store by enjoyment, it is not a prerequisite for good practice: many artists have suffered for their work, and whilst this may seem like a generalised, tongue-in-cheek cliché, without universal applicability, there are some who agree: ‘all artists are willing to suffer for their work [...] but why are so few prepared to learn to draw?’ (Banksy n.d.); ‘an artist’s more profound sufferings – whether emotional or psychological – can often seem to enhance their work’ (Art&DesignBlog 2008). The risk was that the good ones were forced to consider compromising the content of their essays, and had to use their imagination and skill to get it across; the less good ones lacked content, irrespective of their technique. The good ones had to resort to asking readers for help; readers had to understand what might be missing or open up the compressed files of the essay or accept the tone of voice or method of elliptical communication, and then in turn pick up the baton.

The risk here is that readers may not want to do all that because they are put off by a self-conscious style, or may not be able to help because they misunderstand the text. The texts the students might produce may well not conform to academic norms: Catt and Gregory’s idea that writing should render thought ‘inspectable’ (2006: 27) might inadvertently close the circle this experiment has been trying to open, the traditional circle whereby the

writing tells us about what the writer has written instead of showing us what the writer can do. If the audience cannot be reached – i.e. is not a tutor or client – then the risk is greater because the terms of engagement are completely non-negotiable. The risk for me is that students may not get the application to practice because the effort needed in the essay can make it self-referential (a criticism I and others have levelled at the traditional essay or dissertation, for example de Bono (cited in Wood 2011), Womack (paraphrased in Mitchell and Evison 2006), and Watson’s criticism that the dissertation ‘contributes to a scholarly dialogue already under way’ (1987). However, a key consideration is that the students were their own readers, and part of future practice will be to encourage active reading as well as writing.

One student did not in fact enjoy the essay but determined to do better in her presentation, a perfect example of the essay being relevant to practice in a tangible way. Nelson and Grote-Garcia support my stance clearly: they see a writer’s text as valuable ‘mainly for what it can reveal about something else, often the writer’s knowledge, ability or mental “product”’ (2010: 416). However, writing is ‘high on abstraction’ (Catt and Gregory 2006: 16), an abstraction which may be enough to deter students, even subconsciously, from letting one piece of learning colour another. The essay needs practice to be its true conclusion, and in fact should not be marked as writing but as an object. Interestingly, this is *not* like the sketchbook, which is in danger of becoming *too* much an object and not acting enough like this essay: they need to meet at a midpoint. Like the sketchbook, the short essay needs transferable content because there is so much provisionality. It could be argued that this means there is not a perfect form / content union in the essay because the content is provisional, and whilst that could be dismissed as a nice argument, it is nonetheless true and the union might best be described as form / *intent*.

I am already working on other applications of the block and electronic writing apps, including 3D cubes and changeable formats, along with a book chapter on multi-modal writing. The entire enterprise, both the study and any future manifestation, is characterised by the interplay between the unsaid and the fixed – the provisional (and thus shapeless) being made shapeless by a very tangible shape. In a sense, the writing in this project never ends, the essay must be productively and sensitively reinvented so that it, too, avoids self-referential stasis, and Catt and Gregory’s surely well-intentioned view that more HE attention to writing would have ‘significant implications [...] particularly at the drafting stage’ (2006: 29), could be wryly subverted by claiming that these essays are in an eternal drafting stage.

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N.B. Some items' original publication dates are notably different to those of the texts used in this study, mainly because it was not possible to use originals. Where the original date is known, and is thought to be of interest to this study, it is given in brackets at the end of the citation. The publication date of the edition used is given in the usual place, thus:

Anon. (1964) *Setna and the Magic Book*. London: Spring Books, 11-21 (c. 1,400 BC)

Physical exhibits cited are also likely to have two dates in their citation. The date of the exhibition will follow the maker's name in the usual way, with the date of the piece's genesis following the piece's name, thus:

Allen, R. (2010-11) *Pointless Acts 1-41 (or any Sequence from 2-41 Therein)* (1977) [artists' book] 'The Cover of a Book is the Beginning of a Journey' exhibition. Walsall: The New Art Gallery, 9 October-9 January

Capitalisation of titles varies, without following any logical pattern or system. This bibliography respects the capitalisation of the original item wherever possible; thus this bibliography, although faithful, may itself seem inconsistent.

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Appendix 1

128-word draft essays feedback exchanges (email)

Introduction

This appendix contains the full transcripts of email exchanges that I had with students who submitted a draft for feedback. There has been no editing of these draft essay exchanges apart from anonymising all student names and email addresses. The students' sections are arranged here in the original alphabetical order of surname; within each student's section, they are in the order sent, meaning that the top comment is the most recent of any exchange. The comments in the margins are my comments made in the write-up of this thesis, and thus *not* sent to the students. The comments are a commentary on my comments on the students' essays, and sometimes on their own comments.

Themes emerging

My comments in the boxes divide up into those recommending student action and those recognising student achievement. As has been stressed before, these themes were not pre-set in any way: they emerged as a natural product of the work and the responses gleaned from the students. The comments relate the points to literature review themes where appropriate, and to the four main emerging themes, colour-coded as set out here:¹

Theme 1 – **Provisional meaning**, reader-response, vagueness, ambiguity;

Theme 2 – **Risk**, challenge, working with tradition and expectation;

Theme 3 – **Practice parallels**, expression, frustration;

Theme 4 – **Project process**, feedback, future applications and implementation.

Recommended student action:

- **Power of suggestion** (25).
- **Be a bit more daring** (18, 21, 25 – this latter also recommended a tricky integration of form and content to create suggestion);
- **Consider form / content** (3, 13, 14, 15, 17);
- **Concentrate on content and the argument** (5, 8, 12, 20);
- **Consider direct reference (intellectually – not in terms of text references) to discipline** (19).

¹ The colour of the actual boxes varies according to where and when the comments were made – please *disregard* this colour and only note the highlighted colour of the text *within* the boxes.

Recognition of student achievement:

- Provisional meaning, with a clever play on sound (2);
- Plea for risk-taking (7);
- Use of repeats, a short story characteristic analysed in the literature review (1, 4, 10 – this latter with an interesting use of repeats to flag up structure and summary points);
- Strong, graphic opening, also a short story characteristic in the literature review (6);
- Sophisticated engagement (9);
- Playfully ambiguous message, friendly tone of voice...irony? (11, 22);
- Autonomy, mature judgement (16, 24);
- Wealth of material (23, 26, 27).

01

Clip-clop. Go the shoes. Dowdy and worn down to the soles due to extensive use, the owner passes children and adults in a kind of trance - having only precise business in mind. She has only business in mind. The finest clothing made is a person's skin, but, of course, society demands relatively more than this. They get trampled, get run down, jump and move pigeon footed, they are us, and they are more of an addition of us than any other shape of clothing. Brogues aren't just a model of men's shoes, they are men's shoes – and this is the art and the arguments that make women acquire them. Women are rising to command - the shoes were just one measure towards women peeing standing up.

This is really nicely written, [redacted] with a terrific conclusion in the last sentence. The opening two sentences are also a clever play on grammar, because they could be read as one sentence ("Clip-clop go the shoes") but there is also a conversational trick these days where people start a sentence with "go" ('Go [redacted]!'), but I think if you've done this intentionally you might want to bring in one or two other devices like this as well into the piece as you evidently have a gift for writing. I also like the repeat of "business in mind" –very daring when you only have 128 words! The concept of empowerment is good, but perhaps you could mention more about the actual shoes and the patterning etc. – try to bring in more design-specifics but don't change the overall message! In the middle, you say "they get trampled..." – presumably you mean the shoes...it might be good to try to bring in the specifics I mentioned just now round about there. Remember to use the template in Word that I gave you, because that will make the lines an even length and flag up any unevenness that needs attention... Excellent work, and a pleasure to read! Very best wishes, Simon

02

What is wrong with a little bit of complexity?

People aren't simple, straightforward and plain. Life is complicated, so why should graphic design be simple?

When you see something simple, do you find it fascinating? Intriguing? Or even Exciting? People want to see things in life that are different; mesmerising, absorbing, captivating. Things that will make you think, things that

Home 8/1/13 18:16

Comment [1]: Repeat of phrase with focus narrowed and sharpened in second iteration, even though the word "precise" is omitted (my highlighter emphasis).

Simon Bell 8/6/13 16:33

Comment [2]: Example of provisional meaning, and play on sound – punctuation a visual device, this extract subverts expectation whilst still obeying grammatical rules.

Home 8/1/13 18:16

Comment [3]: Formal accentuated in my comment to give content authority.

Home 17/8/13 16:52

Comment [4]: Repeats within limited word count; this was not explicitly discussed or suggested in seminars (cf. literature review, short story section).

Home 8/1/13 18:17

Comment [5]: Content important: as is form, content mix: form is part of overall message here.

Home 8/1/13 18:17

Comment [6]: Nice, direct opening which challenges traditional graphic design agenda right away.

you these are repeats: could save words (although they read well as repeats) will make you question, cause doubt, uncertainty, and interest. What is “could be what’s” the fun in understanding something fully immediately after seeing it?

Apple is far from simple, so why should the logo to represent it be simple?

Why can’t it represent the detail and complexity that apple has?

As humans, don’t need this we like to experiment, have a challenge, take a risk, therefore what is could be “what’s” wrong from creating complex Graphics?

Some suggestions for changing / saving above

You’ve put the case for complexity here, but you need to make more of why you think simple is no good. The modernist architect Mies van der Rohe appropriated the phrase “less is more”, but the post-modern architect Robert Venturi countered that with “less is a bore”, and I think your argument will be stronger if you tell us what’s wrong with simple as well as what’s good about complex. You’ll be pushed for space, but it needs to be done!

03

Is emailing it to you ok??

From: Simon Bell [arx062@coventry.ac.uk]

Sent: 22 November 2011 16:58

To:

Subject: Re: Essay draft so far

This is so much better, . You’ve made it fit fine – it seems to me to be in three main parts: 1. The intro where we hear views on Warhol; 2. Some quotes about art that I guess act as a pivot between 1 and 2, and 3 where you give us more views: this is how it appears...would that be right? I am not getting enough of a sense of what Warhol intended. I’d make the first bit more clearly Warhol’s views on what he intended, then give us the quotes, then give us the conclusions in the way of being comments about his work.

From:

Date: Tue, 22 Nov 2011 16:39:15 +0000

To: “Simon Bell (arx062)” <arx062@coventry.ac.uk>

Subject: RE: Essay draft so far

Thank you

I have worked on it some more since is this what you meant by linking them back to the main debate or should i make more of a link?

From: Simon Bell [arx062@coventry.ac.uk]

Sent: 22 November 2011 16:33

To:

Subject: Re: Essay draft so far

Attached, with some suggestions!

Best wishes, Simon

From:

Date: Tue, 22 Nov 2011 14:20:05 +0000

To: “Simon Bell (arx062)” <arx062@coventry.ac.uk>

Subject: Essay draft so far

What do you think of my essay so far?

How is art valued? Plato- a copy of a copy is worthless; Kant- Tasteful yet soulless, Art from science: skill from knowledge; Savile art valued by longevity; Opinions: needs skill, meaning, depends on its era, What is the value of Andy Warhol’s work? ‘He preceeded us’; ‘had no real point to make’; ‘inexplicable fascintaion’; ‘act mourning’; ‘absence of expression intended to disguise interest and engagement’; ‘absolutely modern’; ‘representation as the main function of art’. Opinions: slutty, repetitive, simplistic, unnecessary, cheap

04

Hi Simon,

Here’s my 128 word essay & bibliography.

Home 8/1/13 18:17

Comment [7]: A plea for risk in the actual essay.

Home 8/1/13 18:17

Comment [8]: Emphasis on content.

Home 8/1/13 18:18

Comment [9]: Sophisticated question, particularly in the light of the level of the students.

Home 8/1/13 18:18

Comment [10]: Repeat of ‘opinions’ (my highlighter emphasis) was unprompted. These act as a neat summary, a rallying-point for the text preceding in each instance: good form / content mix, and gappy set of adjectives summarising text full of blanks – excellent use of reader-response.

I know it says “incomplete” but I assure you, it is.

05

Thank you very much for the feedback, Simon. I have taken on board your suggestions and re-done the essay today. I have attached it in this e-mail. I think this one is much better than the last.

On Fri, Nov 25, 2011 at 10:17 AM, Simon Bell <arx062@coventry.ac.uk> wrote:

This could be your personal statement manifesto, — it certainly seems to come from the heart! A point you might emphasise just a tad more is the one where you say the shoes don't make a girl look intellectual, but the opposite, and I'm interested in this: does it make them look stupid, then? Much of your piece is about keeping clear sexual boundaries and distinctions, and there has been a tradition of blue-stockings (google this: here's a possible ref: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bluestocking>). It's a term for badly-dressed women who might be accused of using intellectual credentials as a mask for not being overtly attractive to the opposite sex, and I think you could cut some of your text (for example the jockstrap bit because that's reading a little like a space-filler) and say something about how it's brave to wear feminine things AND be clever at the same time. You don't have to be unattractive, lesbian and masculine-dressed to be a feminist etc...could you try to get this in? Best wishes, Simon

From:

Date: Thu, 24 Nov 2011 12:23:43 +0000

To: "Simon Bell (arx062)" <arx062@coventry.ac.uk>

Subject: ESSAY (foundation studies)

Hello Simon,

Please find my essay in the attached file.

Thank you

06

Here I've attached my essay, which I made some final touches to.

Thanks,

From: arx062@coventry.ac.uk

To:

Subject: Re:

Date: Tue, 22 Nov 2011 22:53:02 +0000

Hi

I couldn't remember if I'd sent you this paragraph of feedback or not, so, just in case, here it is again!

Apologies for flooding your inbox...Simon

I'd definitely go for version 1. This is excellent, and you make a hard-hitting point. I like your tirade of adjectives in the middle, and you persuasively tell us why we deserve more than the base simple, verging on the simplistic. There is a lovely use of a single word with a full point at the end of the second to last line, and overall your passion is clear. In about lines 2-4 you tend to repeat yourself a bit, and I suggest you consider trying to bolster your argument with a positive: why do humans deserve the complex, and what do we stand to lose if we don't get it? Try to fit this in, but don't lose your confident tone: it's great!

From:

Date: Tue, 22 Nov 2011 04:25:32 -0800

To: "Simon Bell (arx062)" <arx062@coventry.ac.uk>

Subject:

Please find both attached files named “Essay 1” and “Essay 2”. Could you give me some advice as to how I could improve one of these essays? I couldn't decide which essay I preferred so here's both of them. Also, do we need to print the essay it out and hand it in or just email them? Thanks.

Kind Regards,

07

Hi, I decided to change the argument as i found this one easier.

Thanks

Home 8/1/13 18:18

Comment [11]: An ironic comment? Certainly an ambiguous, playful one!

Home 8/1/13 18:18

Comment [12]: Emphasis on content; also on clarifying argument and making it watertight.

Home 17/8/13 16:53

Comment [13]: Content and form link important.

Home 8/1/13 18:19

Comment [14]: Awareness of form, and arguable awareness of its support of overall argument

Home 17/8/13 16:53

Comment [15]: Feedback trying to encourage more of the above (comment 14).

Home 8/1/13 18:19

Comment [16]: I've very seldom come across a student at any level who is not only prepared to change the argument but to change it without discussion about what to change it to. However, it was not a terribly good essay in the end, but at least the student took the risk, which is perhaps all the greater for the mediocre mark it ultimately received.

([REDACTED])

08

From: arx062@coventry.ac.uk
To: [REDACTED]
Subject: RE: 128 word essay - logos
Date: Sat, 26 Nov 2011 01:06:48 +0000
Yes of course.
Best wishes, Simon

From: [REDACTED]
Sent: 25 November 2011 15:55
To: Simon Bell

Subject: RE: 128 word essay - logos

Thanks for the feedback, I would write a revised version, but I don't have Microsoft Word on my laptop at the moment so won't be able to open the essay. The only place I can do it is at uni and I wasn't in today because I was ill. Could I possibly have until 5pm on Monday so I can use the university computers?

From: arx062@coventry.ac.uk
To: [REDACTED]

Subject: Re: 128 word essay - logos
Date: Fri, 25 Nov 2011 10:01:48 +0000
Hi [REDACTED]

Your essay needs to justified on both sides, to make a proper block as the brief requests. Also, it's a line too long! You make a few points but they are much too general and your essay starts with a claim (less is more) that not all designers subscribe to. Try to be more daring: you have a very few words to make an impact, and you have a long quote in the middle that is saying very little in a lot of words. Most of it reads like quotes, and I'd like to hear more of your voice: be creative!
Simon

09

This makes too many lines, and you need to run it through a spell-checker as well because there are some spelling and grammar errors. I understand that English may not be your mother-tongue, but check it any way! In terms of the content: you're right when you say that the more simple the logo, the more boring it CAN appear (but this is not necessarily the case); however, you need to consider the EFFECT of simplicity, because graphic design is measured by success as well as by liking the work. Be more objective and less subjective. You need to use fewer words describing the logos because you're only telling us what we can already see for ourselves, so cut those bits out and start analysing what the job of logos is and how they do this.
Best wishes, Simon

10

Hi !

Now it is in the proper form. I ll try to make it with only questions before 5 pm!
I like this idea ;)

2011/11/25 Simon Bell <arx062@coventry.ac.uk>
Dear [REDACTED]

Thanks for your essay. It's not properly formatted: it is ranged to the left instead of being in one justified block with all lines equal. You need to do this to get the proper fit...as an interior designer, I'm sure you appreciate these essential details! Your piece asks questions: I like this, and perhaps you could make the whole piece a series of questions, leading up to one answer?
See how it feels after you've adjusted the shape as required.

Kind regards, Simon

From: [REDACTED]
Date: Thu, 24 Nov 2011 21:07:17 +0100
To: "Simon Bell (arx062)" <arx062@coventry.ac.uk>
Subject: Essay 128 words
Hi Simon,
Really sorry I didnt how to send it by moodle...

Home 8/6/13 16:38

Comment [17]: Form and content link: all the more visible in such a short and controlled essay format, echoing points made in the literature review (2.5.2) about the short story's quirks. This student utterly changed the next version of the essay, and did very well.

Home 8/6/13 16:38

Comment [18]: In other words, 'take responsibility for engaging and daring objectivity'

Home 8/1/13 18:20

Comment [19]: Connecting the writing with more generic visual arts concerns, but keeping the student's particular discipline within sight.

You ll find attach my essay, hope its not too bad : (

11

I hope its ok!
Best Wishes,

12

Thank you for the feedback, I will take it into account.

From: Simon Bell [arx062@coventry.ac.uk]

Sent: 25 November 2011 10:21

To:

Subject: Re: 128 word essay logos

Lovely essay: you defend them both, and that's very smart...congratulations! You might take out some of the starting sentence (we know all that) and tell us a bit more about how logos condition and reflect a consumer's experience and not just the product they interact with. Also, you're a word or two short at the end! Just a thought: why is Apple's logo easy to interpret? It's easy to see as an apple, but why does it connect with computers? If you showed it to someone who didn't know Apple, would they make the connection...?

From:

Date: Thu, 24 Nov 2011 23:23:08 +0000

To: "s.bell@coventry.ac.uk" <s.bell@coventry.ac.uk>

Subject: 128 word essay logos

This is my 128 word essay about logos

13

From:

To: arx062@coventry.ac.uk

Subject: 128 word essay

Date: Fri, 25 Nov 2011 13:54:33 +0000

Hope you like it 3 words over sorry. Xx

14

Thank you very much for responding to my last minute e-mail! I will try to change few things but,i am not sure i will make it

because of the time left!!!

Thanks again! :)

()

15

Hi Simon,

Thank-very much for helping. I've made some changes to my essay. I'm struggling with fitting everything in. I had to get rid of a few things. But I put in some things that you suggested. This essay is harder than I thought i'd be.

What do you think? Do you think I need to add anything else?

Thank-you

From: arx062@coventry.ac.uk

To:

Subject: Re: 's 128 word essay

Date: Tue, 22 Nov 2011 23:41:59 +0000

Hi

Essay attached. I think you might make some more points (there's some feedback on the essay itself as well). I

Home 8/1/13 18:21

Comment [20]: Focus on the argument / content.

Home 17/8/13 16:53

Comment [21]: See comment 18, above: make certain assumptions about the reader, leave productive (and useful) gaps which can create space to be filled with something more important and which may condition the response to this filler.

Home 8/1/13 18:21

Comment [22]: Well, at least the tone of the feedback engagement was friendly, even if this student struggled.

Home 8/1/13 18:21

Comment [23]: Suggests the student has a wealth of material.

Home 17/8/13 16:53

Comment [24]: See comment 23, above: this suggests that the student is not just struggling to find space, but that valuable material may be lost, and that the student is engaged with difficult editorial judgements.

agree with you, but you have to try to persuade us either by cramming in more info, or by somehow writing this in a complex and engaging way so the essay itself is an example of delightful complexity at work...
See what you think!

Best wishes, Simon

From: [REDACTED]

Date: Tue, 22 Nov 2011 17:02:19 +0000

To: "Simon Bell (arx062)" <arx062@coventry.ac.uk>

Subject: RE: [REDACTED]

Oh okay, Sorry about that. Here it is

Thank-you

[REDACTED]

From: arx062@coventry.ac.uk

To: [REDACTED]

Subject: Re: [REDACTED] 128 word essay

Date: Tue, 22 Nov 2011 16:47:26 +0000

[REDACTED], could you send this to me in Word? It's in a file format I can't edit and as it's not formatted correctly it's hard for me to feedback...thanks! Best wishes, Simon

From: [REDACTED]

Date: Sun, 20 Nov 2011 18:58:35 +0000

To: "Simon Bell (arx062)" <arx062@coventry.ac.uk>

Subject: RE: [REDACTED] 128 word essay

Hi Simon,

Thank-you very much for helping. It was very difficult at times because there were some things that I didn't want to get rid of but I managed it in the end.

It was very hard fitting it all in.

I've started putting in onto the sheet, trying to get it at 16 lines, and as a justified block, but I'm struggling a little bit to get it perfect like it is on the sheet.

Could you possibly suggest what I could do to improve that?

Thank-you

[REDACTED]

From: arx062@coventry.ac.uk

To: [REDACTED]

Subject: Re: [REDACTED] 128 word essay

Date: Wed, 16 Nov 2011 12:47:06 +0000

Hi [REDACTED]

I've made some changes and suggestions to your essay – I enjoyed it very much, but there are some things you could do to improve it.

Best wishes, Simon

From: [REDACTED]

Date: Tue, 15 Nov 2011 18:04:10 +0000

To: <s.bell@coventry.ac.uk>

Subject: [REDACTED] 128 word essay

I'm pleased with my essay but I'll probably have to change it a bit.

I'm not sure if I have made enough points?

[REDACTED]

16

Hello, this is my completed 128 word essay. I hope this is okay!

Thank you

Home 8/1/13 18:21

Comment [25]: The power of suggestion, inextricably bound up with form: a difficult, and thus risky, strategy.

Home 8/1/13 18:22

Comment [26]: Awareness of content and the aggregate power of component parts.

Home 8/1/13 18:22

Comment [27]: A restless spirit, perhaps, or just the dawning realisation of how strong perfect form is in both expressing content and hiding, or at least minimising, any defects in content.

Appendix 2

Questionnaires for 128-word essay students

Introduction

This appendix contains the original request sent out on Moodle, the questions asked and the responses. The comments in the margins are my comments made in the write-up of this thesis. There has been no editing of these questionnaires apart from anonymising all student names.

The review box comments are linked to literature review themes here, although these links are more comprehensively and graphically set out in Table 3 (5.3.3). The review box comments are for the benefit of this thesis, and did not form the basis for any discussion with students. As has been stressed before, these themes were not pre-set in any way: they emerged as a natural product of the work and the responses gleaned from the students.

The comments are colour-coded according to the themes emerging, set out here:¹

Theme 1 – **Provisional meaning**, reader-response, vagueness, ambiguity;

Theme 2 – **Risk**, challenge, working with tradition and expectation;

Theme 3 – **Practice parallels**, expression, frustration;

Theme 4 – **Project process**, feedback, future applications and implementation.

Text of request sent out on Moodle (Coventry University intranet) in March 2012

Hi,

You were one of the Foundation students who did the 128-word essay before Christmas.

It would be very helpful if you could fill out this questionnaire (included further down in this message) for me and email it back in the next two weeks.

Please feel free to expand on any of the answers – write as much as you'd like.

Just email it back to me on s.bell@coventry.ac.uk, either in the main body of your email or as a Word attachment if you prefer.

If you are one of the students I am interviewing, I'd still like you to do this.

Thank you very much,

Best wishes,

Simon Bell

¹ The colour of the actual boxes varies according to where and when comments were made – please *disregard* this colour and only note the highlighted colour of the text *within* the boxes.

Text of the questions sent out on Moodle, with rationales in review comment boxes**1. Did you enjoy writing the-128 word essay?**Yes / No (*delete as appropriate*)**Why / why not?****2. Did you find it a different experience to other essays you have done?**Yes / No (*delete as appropriate*)**Why / why not?****3. Do you think you benefitted from writing the 128-word essay?**Yes / No (*delete as appropriate*)**Why / why not?****Any other comments on the 128-word essay?**

In keeping with Bryman's views on open questions within questionnaires, I clearly could not directly ask any of my research questions in the questionnaire. Therefore I asked questions which I felt were more meaningful in the context of the project and the students' experience. The rationale behind the claimed links above is as follows:

Question 1: The short story as a piece of literature was discussed a little during the seminars, in particular the Orwell collection because he was an author generally heard of – giving the collection perhaps palpably common access – but of a collection of stories few of the students had read. The *principles* behind the short story, as analysed in the literature review, were discussed more; these being delimitation involving more than just length, suggestion, subversion and the emphasis on formal features. In connection with these, notions of provisional meaning and in particular vague language and colloquial tactics for getting content into the essays – such as initialisms and text-speak, which compress and communicate quickly to a particular audience – were also discussed. Thus the essay was posited as a possibly enjoyable, joyous even, foray into new territory, with the short story enveloping the whole experience.

Question 2: Although I did not interview or follow up any responses from the control group students, in my experience visual arts students tend not to take risks in their essay work: the formats are quite fixed, as we have seen in the literature review, and there is a tendency for visual arts HE academic writing to conform, both in the setting and in the answering. The way the essay was set up in this study was a balance between demands of content and demands of space: neither one was foregrounded before the other. In order to make this work, students might have to resort to desperate remedies, thus bringing in a dimension of risk.

Question 3: The connection here is more straightforward than in the preceding questions, although I have left the type of benefit open to students: they might say they benefitted because the essay was short and they hate writing, they may enjoy the essay as a discrete activity and felt they benefitted from a different writing experience, or they may set out complex and fecund reasons why it connected to their practice. Following Bryman's recommendations (2007: 145), the question is open enough to catch unexpected benefits, and in this way it leads neatly into the fourth catch-all question: the questionnaire thus has a logical, if modest, layout.

Home 21/1/13 05:31

Comment [1]: This relates to Research Question 1:
How do insights gained from the analysis of the short story genre aid the setting and assessment of visual arts writing tasks?

Home 21/1/13 05:31

Comment [2]: This relates to Research Question 2:
Do short essays encourage the kind of risk-taking that we wish to foster in visual arts students?

Home 21/1/13 05:31

Comment [3]: This relates to Research Question 3:
What benefits for future practice can be gained through the writing of short essays that cannot be gained through the writing of long essays?

Simon Bell (arx062) 21/1/13 05:31

Comment [4]: There is always something in questionnaires like this which one forgets, cannot predict without making the questionnaire overlong in an effort to be inclusive, or which students unwittingly answer in relation to the main questions because they have misunderstood the main questions' phrasing. Interviewers often get the best material after the formal interview has finished, photographers frequently get the best images after the formal photo-shoot has finished; both these opportunities are random: this question was meant to catch any such random responses.

Questionnaire responses and my review box comments (added for this thesis)

01

1. Did you enjoy writing the 128-word essay?

Yes

It was different, at first it felt it was going to be easy being just 128 words but once I started to write I could not stop and adjusting words to fit the space available and how many words I could use made it very difficult. It was a challenge and i guess that is why i enjoyed it allot also i picked the car topic being a major fan of cars it also contributed to the enjoyment of writing this essay.

2. Did you find it a different experience to other essays you have done?

Yes

I have never really writing an essay similar to this one before, and I usually hate essays (Yes HATE strong word but i do) but this one i was actually very open minded to, maybe because it was car related but I think its more because of it being a challenge being different, majority of essays i have written were pages and pages long.

3. Do you think you benefitted from writing the 128-word essay?

Yes

Definitely, it has made me think more about the things i write in my annotation in my sketchbook, as a product designer it is important that i am clear about what i say also since we don't usually write allot so picking words to best describe what we are talking about does benefit me allot,

4. Any other comments on the 128-word essay?

As i have stated above i HATE writing essays but this one in particular was very enjoyable, i think this essay could have gone the other way for me thou. One think that really made this essay easier and more enjoyable was the fact that we had different topics to chose from, if we all had to do the logo one for example i think it would have been more difficult and I would not have enjoyed it, so the choice of topic really helped, I picked the car one because i was interesting for me which on the other hand made it more difficult since i had more to say. But usually in essays i had written before in school and college where not about things that i was interested in. I would not mind doing another 128 word essay as long as it appeals to me like this one did.

02

1. Did you enjoy writing the 128-word essay?

No

Why / why not?

For the most part, it was quite a stressful experience as it was very challenging to structure the essay and it became extremely frustrating at times (though that's not to say I'm not glad I did it, and I suppose creative work will never be any good if there isn't some frustration involved at some point during the process!)

2. Did you find it a different experience to other essays you have done?

Yes

Why / why not? - I've never written an essay so short and concise, let alone one that lacks grammar and standard english.

3. Do you think you benefitted from writing the 128-word essay?

Yes

Why / why not?

It allowed me to 'break free' from constraints such as the expected structure of an essay. It was very difficult for me to use 'text speak' in an essay purely because it went against my expectations of what an essay 'should' be, but once I began shortening sentences to make my points yet stay within the word limit, I realised that using unconventional language fit in nicely with the contents of the essay.

Home 21/1/13 05:31

Comment [5]: A common mistake, in my experience, and not just in this particular project, students frequently think writing assignments which are shorter, or essays which are different, like picture essays, will be easier than conventional assignments. Both are hard because students have to edit, which means making a decision and prioritising, taking responsibility because they cannot resort to familiar solutions.

Home 21/1/13 05:31

Comment [6]: The exercise seems to have aroused this student's persistence.

Home 21/1/13 05:31

Comment [7]: It was difficult, ..

Home 8/6/13 16:54

Comment [8]: ...but at least the difficulty was in productive in this respect...

Home 8/6/13 16:54

Comment [9]: ...despite its restrictions, ..

Home 8/6/13 16:54

Comment [10]: ...the topic helped, but so did the shortness.

Home 21/1/13 05:31

Comment [11]: Good; but the evidence for this is only anecdotal (although staff reported a general improvement in some Personal Statements)

Home 21/1/13 05:31

Comment [12]: Link to discipline practice.

Home 21/1/13 05:31

Comment [13]: The danger here is that it becomes too comfortable a project to be repeated *ad nauseam*; it *must* be varied to keep being fresh.

Home 21/1/13 05:31

Comment [14]: Not everyone enjoys creativity, true creativity; it can be a painful and intense process

Home 8/6/13 16:57

Comment [15]: See comment 14, above.

Home 21/1/13 05:31

Comment [16]: Excellent: good form / content connection

03

Did you enjoy writing the 128-word essay?

Yes

Why / why not?

i enjoyed being creative with the writing and presentation of the essay. it was challenging but in an interesting way.

Did you find it a different experience to other essays you have done?

Yes

Why / why not?

most other essays include writing a lot of words, i preferred only writing 128 words.

Do you think you benefitted from writing the 128-word essay?

Yes

Why / why not?

i became more aware of how creativity and art/design can be incorporated into writing.

Any other comments on the 128-word essay?

i liked the challenge of writing in a box, this made the essay a lot more interesting to write.

Home 21/1/13 05:31

Comment [17]: Challenge perceived but welcomed; intrigued but did not intimidate.

04

Did you enjoy writing the 128-word essay?

Yes

Presented challenges in form that interested me. It was short so there were more boundaries to play with. It could be argued creatively using a story.

Did you find it a different experience to other essays you have done?

Yes

Having to find the right word that fit instead of finding a word that made more sense in the essay. You see letters and words as taking up different amounts spaces.

Do you think you benefitted from writing the 128-word essay?

Yes

Writing other peices become more creatively stretching. E.g. I'm on the press gang for fierce festival and they want it to be more interesting on the eye when reading the blog and doing this essay gave me ideas to work on form more than the usual structure of a 500 word essay

Home 8/6/13 16:56

Comment [18]: Good synthesis of activities; blurring domain boundaries (cf. literature review, 2.3.4).

Home 8/6/13 16:56

Comment [19]: Link to practice coming through. This was not overstated in the brief (cf. Tonfoni, literature review, 2.2.5).

Home 8/6/13 16:59

Comment [20]: This goes some way to supporting earlier claims made in the literature review about constraints offering opportunity (cf., in particular, analysis of the short story, 2.5.4).

Home 21/1/13 05:31

Comment [21]: The creativity here is in terms of domain-expansion.

Home 21/1/13 05:31

Comment [22]: Unconscious introduction of reader-response, and related to the analysis of the short story and authorial abdication of responsibility: this student is acknowledging that the wrong word may have been used, or at least the not-perfect one, because of external demands. These demands may be recognised – and sanctioned, whether consciously or not – by the reader/s.

Home 21/1/13 05:31

Comment [23]: Direct connection of essay benefit to practice.

Home 21/1/13 05:31

Comment [24]: One might ask 'in what sense, creative?', but creativity avoids definition. The suggestion here is that it was a positive experience (and not as stressful as that of responder 02).

Home 21/1/13 05:31

Comment [25]: I guess this is what is meant by 'creative', above, so a definition of creativity, based on a single experience but nonetheless apparently easily connecting with previous experience, might be tentatively claimed here: it could be about finessing form and content for a particular purpose.

Home 8/6/13 16:59

Comment [26]: Some creativity is defined in terms of changing approach, and being adaptable (cf. literature review, 2.3.2).

05

1. Did you enjoy writing the 128-word essay?

Yes

Why / why not ?

It was a challenge ,to write and in a sense it was creative.

2. Did you find it a different experience to other essays you have done?

Yes

Why / why not?

It was very specific ,because I had to think about the size of it and exactly what words to use in order for it all to line up.

3. Do you think you benefitted from writing the 128-word essay?

Yes

Why / why not?

Yes,it changed the way I thought about essays and the words I used . I also attempted to use light humour which

I havnt done before.

4. Any other comments on the 128-word essay?

Not really, but I think it would be good practice to do more of these excersises,to challenge the way you write, and I was glad to be part of it.

06

1. Did you enjoy writing the 128-word essay?

Yes

Although a challenge, I enjoyed the task of writing an essay to meet certain requirements. It did take time, cropping and re aligning the words, but I happily reached the end :)

2. Did you find it a different experience to other essays you have done?

Yes

At A Level I did English Literature, therefore was used to writing lots of long essays, this one was by far a lot more enjoyable.

3. Do you think you benefitted from writing the 128-word essay?

Yes

Doing this essay allowed me to have a creative angle, and has changed how I annotate my work and avoid babble!

07

1. Did you enjoy writing the 128-word essay?

No

Why / why not?

It wasnt enjoyable as i am not a fan of writing, it bored me.

2. Did you find it a different experience to other essays you have done?

Yes

Why / why not?

ive never had to cramp my point across in 128 words! but im glad i had the chance to experiment whether i could do it or not

3. Do you think you benefitted from writing the 128-word essay?

Yes

Why / why not?

It makes me think about any object or thing and what the main characteristics are

4. Any other comments on the 128-word essay?

I was glad i was able to help

Simon Bell (arx062) 21/1/13 05:31

Comment [27]: Evidence that the student is going into uncharted territory – risky...but confident

Home 21/1/13 05:31

Comment [28]: Implicit criticism of traditional writing, at least as experienced by this one visual arts student.

Home 8/6/13 17:01

Comment [29]: Reinforces the idea mooted in the literature review analysis of short stories that visual arts practice thrives on restrictions of one sort or another (2.5.3, 2.5.4).

Home 21/1/13 05:31

Comment [30]: Described here in the same terms as one would expect to be used in studio practice.

Home 21/1/13 05:31

Comment [31]: Enjoyable

Home 21/1/13 05:31

Comment [32]: There is no certain evidence that it is because it was conceived for visual arts students, but some circumstantial evidence suggests it.

Home 21/1/13 05:31

Comment [33]: This cuts both ways: it saves 'babble', as testified here, but it also affects the work itself if we accept the premise that annotation is a two-way process in which the work is implicitly criticised, or summarised by the annotation. If so, and the words are more concise, then the process of refining the work produced will presumably also change. If that change aligns, or can be made to align, with current, ongoing studio work, then the writing can be said to have directly influenced it.

Home 21/1/13 05:31

Comment [34]: Nice and concise: a good basis for writing the essay.

Home 21/1/13 05:31

Comment [35]: So there was something positive to be got from the project.

Home 21/1/13 05:31

Comment [36]: Despite this responder not liking writing, and finding this boring, he / she has identified a clear, practice-based advantage.

Appendix 3

Interviews with selected 128-word essay students

Introduction

This appendix contains the full, professionally transcribed text of the interviews. The text has not been edited in any way apart from redacting names where necessary. At nearly 28,000 words (5.5 hours of recording) the interviews represent the most dense and comprehensive body of evidence in this study. It is clearly not practical to analyse each page: accordingly the text here has been highlighted to show where the four themes occur, or could be argued to occur, whereas the analysis in Chapter 4 is to see if and how the 128-word essay answers the research questions in this study.

The passages, exchanges and extracts in the interviews in this appendix are colour-coded according to the themes emerging, set out here:

Theme 1 – **Provisional meaning**, reader-response, vagueness, ambiguity;

Theme 2 – **Risk**, challenge, working with tradition and expectation;

Theme 3 – **Practice parallels**, expression, frustration;

Theme 4 – **Project process**, feedback, future applications and implementation.

A black line down the left-hand margin of text denotes the extent of the extract discussed, containing highlighted passages, which might be spoken by me as well as by students. Below each of these passages are **blue texts**: these contain my comments on the interviews, linking them to the research questions and the literature review, usually but not always with a short summary.

Because of the interweaving of themes and the complexity of the material and the subject matter – risk associated with a new type of work and provisional meaning – each passage indicated by a line does not deal exclusively with one theme. However, I have taken what I believe are the relevant words from each exchange that summarise the overall points made in blue beneath, so as not to lose any build-up to the blue points. In addition, a word or phrase associated with the blue point beneath may have other points coming between it and its write-up in blue.

I did not ask students the research questions in the interviews because the questions do not relate to the students' experience directly, and the questions' wording may thus have seemed opaque, producing inaccurate and irrelevant answers. The research questions need to be addressed and answered by subtle and imaginative analysis of this material.

01

SB Thanks for doing this [REDACTED]. All the ethical clearances I've had done so it will be anonymised. You're welcome to see what I say, I usually just take quotes and things from people. I've already got the questionnaire sent out and I've got quite a lot of other information, but really there were three things I wanted to pursue in the interview which you can't in a questionnaire. Presumably the essay has restrictions that you've not come across before.

Response Unique.

SB Unique in what way then?

Response Well I've never had an essay where I have to do exactly a certain number of words, it's always been no more than so and so or at least this many, never exactly 128- and then the 16-line restriction and the margins stay the same so it was an interesting challenge.

- **RQ2** Challenge: suggestion of happily going into new territory;

- **RQ3** Precision, fit, restriction: core aspects of visual arts practice, in particular for automotive design (this student's intended specialism).

If the essay inspires a union between the above, then there should be interesting outcomes: these represent polar opposites, bringing Koestler's idea of creativity as reconciling opposites to mind (cf. literature review, 2.3.3).

SB Is that a good thing or a bad thing?

Response I enjoyed it.

SB You say interesting, was it good or bad, did you enjoy the restrictions?

Response I enjoyed it. It was a little difficult for me because I like creating an argument and with so many restrictions it was really difficult but it was still interesting I had to come up with other ways to do it.

- **RQ3** The project spawned invention, surely key to visual arts creative practice, however that might be interpreted.

We have seen in the literature review (2.3.2) – albeit in relative outline – that creativity is hard to define. These students are at Foundation level, where definitions and expressions of creativity are embryonic: the above reaction is hopeful.

SB Of creating an argument?

Response Exactly, and effective argument but it was a thinking game for me, one that I enjoyed.

SB Okay, would you say then that the restrictions stimulated you, or did you find them just a bit, did you think oh that's a nuisance?

Response No definitely stimulating, yeah. I was forced to think up different ways to do it, not just, my argument would have been the same if it wasn't for the simulations. It could have been argued even better but it doesn't mean I didn't gain anything out of it.

SB What do you think you did gain from it?

Response Just creative thinking, doing things differently, getting things straight to the point instead of just waffling around with adjectives and descriptions and sometimes I like throwing in a bit of random things that don't really pertain to the conversation too much but they're just entertaining to read. I realised I couldn't do that.

- **RQ2** Challenge: forced into new territory;

- **RQ3** Builds on the above to get to the practice-based point.

The essay has clearly prompted – forced, even – this student to abandon previously-enjoyed irrelevancies. Whilst this might make the essay seem almost puritanically severe, it is worth noting that the student enjoyed the challenge.

SB Well you could but at the expense of something else.

Response Exactly. There would have been significant trade-offs, I came to the conclusion that I had to decide what's worth keeping, what's worth not keeping and it helped me come up with decisions basically.

- **RQ2** Autonomy: the student came to the conclusion unaided;

- **RQ3** Short-cut to practice-based confidence.

SB Do you think if you'd just been given 128 words without fitting it into a block how different would that have been?

Response A little different, not too different but I would notice the difference I would have to remove certain particular words, even like trivial words like the and and, and I had to replace them with longer words, shorter words so it would have needed difference in the sense that there would have been slight details that would have changed. Maybe that would have led to an even bigger difference down the road, I'm not entirely sure but it wouldn't have been a drastic change in the argument itself.

SB But some of those would have a different meaning don't they?

Response Yes. I think I came across that a few times where I wanted a stronger word but I was forced to dilute it a bit for the sake of fitting it in the margins.

- **RQ1, RQ3** The student was forced to make things fit: a classic vague language problem stemming from the short story's dependence on provisional meaning. Physical and social fits are also very useful practice-based considerations, and echo Koestler's views about reconciling opposites (2.3.3).

As we have seen in the literature review (2.4.3), vague language is quite strictly defined by community and context: context can equally be a matter of physical fit as it can one of community approval, indeed, both are metrics of vague language acceptance.

SB In yours, I've printed yours out, you've used quite a lot of bold throughout, can you remember why you did that?

Response Yes, it was my way of cheating a little bit, to make the margins fit perfectly. Sometimes I'd come across that there is no other way to do than to rewrite stuff entirely and I wouldn't have wanted to compromise that much so I realised that by bolding it some letters bold more than other and create more space so it pushed the margins even more a little bit so it was just a matter of finding which words to bold, which letters to bold and how much space I would add onto the margins.

SB So it became a kind of a visual fitting exercise?

- **RQ3** Intelligent design.

Response Yeah and yet I kind of liked how it looked to, it wasn't just a bunch of like marks.

SB Should we be trying to read any sense into which words have been put into bold?

Response Absolutely not. I was thinking about it as I was going, how to make this significant in a way.

- **RQ1** The short story and 'perfect' form.

The student might be accused of abdicating any responsibility for interpretation, but literature review analysis shows that the short story thrives on abdication (2.5.4).

02

SB You did quite an unusual essay. Why did you do that?

Response Well I thought because the essay was like based on fashion like it was (unclear 00:22) design a (unclear) women I thought that fashion is more dependent on like the public because that's what makes it like a section or not. I thought if I asked everyone then they would decide if it was (unclear) or not.

- **RQ3** Practice link.

SB So how did your essay ask everyone?

Response Because I went around and asked people and I wrote down what they said.

SB So the essay was like a condensation of responses from all around?

- **RQ1** The short story has to compress.

This connects with the literature review discussion about short story length (2.5.2) – not just in terms of physical size but in terms of compression, and its ability to contain what a novel might: or, crucially, if not to contain it, to suggest it and to plant the idea in the reader's mind.

Response Yeah.

SB Okay, have you done an essay like that before with 128 words?

Response No.

SB Did you enjoy doing it that short or would you have rather have written a long one?

Response No I prefer to write short, it's creative. I don't like writing too long.

SB In what way was it more creative?

Response Because you had to like really think about how to get all the points across in the exact square.

- **RQ3** Forced to think – creativity not a reductive styling exercise.

SB Okay, why couldn't you have done that, why couldn't you have done all of your, I guess there's no, with the 1,000 word essay?

Response Because I thought a thousand word essay probably have to go into a lot more detail about things and I don't know explain things a lot more.

- **RQ1** The short story subverts partly because it is incomplete in so many ways, and goes against many creative mantras about full, incontrovertible messages in a piece of work; art is not handed out on a plate.
This links the short story and the creativity discussions in the literature review (2.5 and 2.3).

SB So I don't want to put words into your mouth here but did the 128 word essay and the shape of it then, did that make you feel as though it was legitimate for you to go out and do something a bit weirder?

Response Yeah.

- **RQ2** Challenge: licence to try something different.
Crucial balance here between being told to go out and experiment and feeling licenced to do this; this is touched on in the literature review.

SB Okay because it was just a different format?

Response Yeah, because you had to make those (unclear 02:08) and also we had to have it all fit properly, had to think about how I was writing it with things like capital letters take up more space and things like that.

SB Did you enjoy doing it?

Response Yeah.

- **RQ3** Reflects art practice in fitting – the plasticity of visual arts, even digital work – and enjoying the process.

SB And did you think that, did it stop, once you finished doing the essay did you kind of think in terms of right I think I can do that in my creative work or was it just in the essay? After you finished doing the essay did you then think of what you'd done creatively in any other sense or did it just stop when you finished doing the essay? Things like breaking rules?

Response Yeah it did help. It made me realise that you can just, like as long as there's like a reason it can pretty much like explore every way of doing something.

SB So it would be true to say that you, that it kind of opened up possibilities, would that be right?

Response Yeah.

SB And have you used those possibilities since? Have you actually put them into anything else?

Response Yeah I think projects have become a lot more, I don't know, need my imagination and like I've gone about things in different ways.

- **RQ2** Intelligent risk.
Risk has to be intelligent or else it is not a risk; it has to understand what is at stake to distinguish it from stupidity.

SB Do you ever revisit the essay, look at it and think I'm quite proud of that?

Response Yeah.

- **RQ2** Autonomy.

SB Well you did work well, because you got 96, 84 hits the mark and you did well in your presentation as well. Did you find at all that anything you did in the essay you could apply to your presentation or did you see them as two quite separate things?

Response Yeah I think they were separate things because I think my work is just completely like different and also floating the images I thought it was actually like a lot harder to get my thing across I think.

SB So would it have been helpful to you if I had at some point during the essay if I'd said explain why you did what you did? Would that have been useful, when I finished the essay I just gave you some feedback and left it, do you think it would have been useful if I'd sat you down or given you a piece of paper and said right why did you do what you did and what do you think, explain your essay to me and then so that you had an articulation of what you'd done, would that have been helpful?

Response Yeah

- **RQ3** Articulating what has been achieved.

Much of what is emerging from this study is either an unclear or a conventional understanding of creativity: this essay should help to correct this, and to help the maker, the practitioner, to enjoy taking on the responsibility for deciding just what creativity might be. This kind of pedagogic activity has to accompany this kind of project, rather than the project being assessed as a piece of writing in its own right, and on its own terms.

SB So you learnt that from it. Do you think that you found out more about if you like fashion from doing this or do you think you found out more about writing?

Response I think I learnt both because writing I kind of found out that I don't need to like waffle on, I can just do a really short essay and I think because I wrote it in such a different way, people would look at it and be like oh I'm not (unclear 00:44) what she said.

- **RQ1** Be concise;

- **RQ3** Connections with practice.

There is also awareness here about audience reaction to the writing, and thus by extension the associated work and the student's own work, provided of course the link between these can be made in whatever manner might be decided at any later date.

SB So there's something in here which is going to make people wonder why you've done what you've done?

Response Yeah I think rather than just like reading a load of text that exactly explains everything.

SB So you don't think this exactly explains everything?

Response I think people would have to question me to understand it fully.

SB Is that a good thing?

Response Yeah I think so. Because then it gets them interested.

SB Is that something that you would apply in your own practical work and not just in writing an essay, the idea that you want to get people absorbed and interested?

Response Yeah.

- **RQ1** Short story concision / compression, and reliance on provisional meaning;

- **RQ2** The process above involves risk, challenging many design norms.

The literature review discussed the *Crash* book cover as an example of suggestion in design (2.4.4), especially in the sense that it did not even have to represent the content of the book accurately; much visual arts are about persuasion and not information: this is not particular to graphic design. Fine art might persuade through harmony, music through symphony: the point of both being to validate the approach / technique and to secure positive status of the works in audience's minds, with the message varying. This is obvious when one considers time lapses between access to art and its making: the contextual disconnect. In Tolstoy's *Kreutzer Sonata*, the protagonist Pozdnyshev argues that music of such quality as Beethoven's sonata should only be played when actions that 'correspond to the nature of the music' have to be performed, because otherwise the inappropriateness of the context 'can't have anything but a harmful effect' (2007: 112). Beethoven's *Eroica*, for example, has an out-of-date specific aim: its context has changed too much for it to inform in the way it was meant to. It has to persuade listeners today that it has an enduring and yet different relevance, or it will remain an historical relic, and visual artists need to be thinking in this way.

SB And were you aware of that before you did this or did the essay help you think of that as a possible design strategy?

Response Yeah I think the essay helped me with that.

- **RQ3** [Direct link to practice.](#)

SB To consider this idea of we're all going to respond to fashion in different ways, we're all going to see something different?

Response Yeah.

- **RQ1 > RQ3** Short story's provisional meaning connects with fashion agenda.

This shows how the research questions can both overlap and be a stepping-stone to each other, and in this latter case by missing out the question in between. There are many overlaps in these themes and questions: they are hard to demarcate easily; it is unwise to try to do this.

SB That's good. Do you think you'd ever do this again?

Response Yeah I'd prefer to do that again than a normal essay.

SB Would you?

Response Yeah.

SB Do you ever do this in your sketch book, do you ever find yourself thinking back to doing this and sort of thinking I can say this in fewer words?

Response Not really.

SB When you wrote this, did you sort of write 160 words or something and then try and compress it into the shape or did you try to write within the square first of all?

Response No I wrote everything, like full lines and then I like got the exact amount of words and then the amount of lines and then I tried to line all that.

SB And that's something you'd do in your own work anyway, just sort of, we all do the same don't we, give it a, start thinking and then see where the restrictions are. Do you enjoy the restrictions and the constraints that you had here?

Response Yeah I though they were a bit frustrating sometimes, like I couldn't get it completely right but I thought it made it a bit more like challenging in kind of some ways.

- **RQ1 > RQ2 > RQ3** [connecting directly.](#)

SB So writing became fun?

Response Yeah.

SB Did you ever think you'd say that?

Response No.

Excellent!

SB And the restrictions, you get restrictions in everything. You get restrictions in fashion design and everything whether it's cost or time restrictions or the kind of shop that you're working for, whatever, you're always going to have restrictions. I guess it's true to say those restrictions within this which parallel restrictions you might find in anything else but did you consciously make that link between this and design restrictions at the time or not? Did it just work for an essay?

Response I don't think of thought of the writing restrictions.

SB Would it have been more interesting or less interesting or stimulating or whatever if I'd said to you write 150 words or write 500 words or whatever, and then after a week, said now fit it into 128 in a block?

Response Yeah I think that would have been a bit harder because I would have written a lot and then not known what to take out and stuff, in that one I knew it had to be really selective.

SB Right from the very start, so the idea of being selective from the beginning you found that was, how can I put it, you preferred that?

Response Yeah.

SB You felt that was more stimulating to do that way?

Response Yeah.

- **RQ2** Challenge: suggestion of happily going into new territory;

- **RQ3** Enjoyed it, found it demanding and more stimulating.

The risk to practice link is quite clearly articulated here, bearing in mind that selection has been seen as a risky activity.

SB Well I'm not sure, I've really got a lot out of you with that, so I'm really grateful, is there anything you wanted to ask me about it or anything you wanted to say? No? Do you think you've learnt anything about fashion from doing the essay?

Response Well I think as I said about the whole male and female point of view like oh no they haven't any talent, it's like lazy but girls are like, I think it wasn't lazy, I think girls want to be seen on the same level as boys.

- **RQ3** Application to practice.

Practitioners should not be too specific: this student is not being inarticulate but aware of different possibilities.

SB But how did writing a short essay help you come to those conclusions as opposed to writing a long one?

Response Because I think if I'd have written a long one I wouldn't have asked, I was just kind of like (unclear00:32) the internet so I got like people's opinions a lot more.

SB More focus?

Response Yeah.

- **RQ3** Direct link to practice suggested, and not on a simple level: it is articulated in terms of what enriches practice.

SB And what about the stuff you couldn't say in the essay, because obviously you can't say as much as you can in a thousand words. What about all the stuff you couldn't say, do you worry about that or is it just let the audience make up their mind and let the readers get on with it?

Response I think because I wrote a few phrases into it (unclear) think a bit more about that whereas I didn't like find more about it but I think people would think about it.

SB And that's an important part of work, to get people thinking for themselves.

Response Yeah.

SB That's good. Do you do that in your practice just dropping an idea and let them get on with it?

Response Yes.

- **RQ1 > RQ3** Direct link between provisional meaning and practice methods.

This links to the literature review's discussion of Harkin's view that reader-response is so much a norm nowadays that nobody even remarks upon it any more (2.4.2): this student never mentions reader-response but the notion of provisional meaning being an essential part of creative strategy is never far from the surface.

SB Are you going to study fashion?

Response Yeah.

SB Are you going to do it here or are you going to head off somewhere?

Response No I want to study here.

SB Well you never know you might do it on (unclear)

Response Maybe.

SB Eyes roll in horror. That's been really helpful. Thank you so much. Is there anything you wanted to ask me at all?

Response No.

SB As I said this is all, it will be done anonymously. I'm not going to do word by word, I might just take a few phrases that you used. I won't mention you by name but I've had all the ethical clearances, that's all been done but you're welcome to see what I write if you want to. Thank you so much.

03

SB Obviously this essay isn't one like most essays, that you've done before, so how did you approach it compared to how you would approach a normal essay? You did tell me you studied English literature.

Response Yeah well for me it was, when I first started the intention was I'll try and make it into a box later so I did it and then

SB So you just wrote something?

Response yeah

SB And then tried to make a box out of it, was that the wrong way to do it?

Response It was because it just went and then you get to the point where you try to make it into a square. That took me the longest actually getting it into a square, then having to do the synonyms and change it round and get rid of words and stuff.

SB Did you enjoy doing it?

Response Yeah because when I initially wrote it I made it into an essay but it didn't make sense for 128 to put it down into that much so I went more creatively and decided making a little story out of it instead. Yeah it was interesting like that.

- **RQ1** Short story form inspires form / content interface;

- **RQ2** Productive autonomy.

This student made a fiction out of the essay without any prompting from me. This connects with literature review discussions about domain-breaking as part of risk, and of domain boundaries as part of sanctuary (2.3.4).

SB You didn't feel at any stage, you didn't ask me whether you could do that, write an essay which was a bit more creative like a story or anything like that so what gave you, what do you feel gave you the right to do that? You take what I mean?

Response Yeah it was just because you said it was persuasive argument and I suppose lots of arguments don't have to be that's that, normally I find when you look at something it's more the stories that you're interested in, it feels like evidence then, that's a story someone's actually had experience with that.

SB So to go back to what you were saying about persuasive you could persuade by any means, fair or foul?

Response Yeah.

SB As long as you persuade people that's okay?

Response Mm.

- **RQ1** Persuasive and slightly subversive nature of short story hinted at here;

- **RQ2** It is a risky approach (even though risk is written into course documentation, its nature or purpose is never articulated. If you decide this for yourself, that alone is a risk: this is discussed in the literature review in connection with autonomy – 2.3.4). The confidence in this response is in the way the student is happy to let provisional meaning do its work without interference; note, too, that provisional meaning is not mentioned as such, reinforcing Harkin's stance as discussed in the literature review (2.4.2).

SB And did you feel that if I'd given you a thousand word essay that that would have forced you into more conventional kind of format?

Response Definitely. I even actually, I had a Goldsmith interview, I had to do a portfolio and they wanted an essay which was, and I thought I'll do that but I thought if they think you know it's so small and I tried with a thousand words and it just went, it was just too formal.

- **RQ1** The short story is the form of the marginal: see literature review, 2.5.4.

SB Did you give them that?

Response Yeah.

SB What did they say?

Response I don't know, they haven't come back to me.

SB Did you say to them it was meant to be that short?

Response I gave them exactly that.

SB That will be interesting. What do you want to study at Goldsmiths, fine art?

Response Yeah.

SB So how does this connect then to fine art practice doing this essay?

Response I used the fashion one because I don't know, it was just I suppose you could have done anything, Marilyn Monroe and Andy Warhol. It relates to me as art because you know it's making something, you're also making a box and it's sort of rebelling against what you would normally see on a page.

SB Did you come to that conclusion or did I in the course of the seminar lay that on quite thick or did you come to that conclusion as well or a combination?

Response Combination yeah.

- **RQ1** Short story celebration of form;

- **RQ3** Post-essay work will need to bring this out.

See discussion above about seeing these essays as part of an ongoing piece of practice and not as a discrete piece of assessed work: the fascinating paradox – as in the short story – is that the essays have such an intense concentration on form. But the writers have to move on.

SB So do you think it would be fair to say then that you can see a parallel between what you had to do there and what you might do in any creative practice which is work with form and breaking conventions and breaking rules etc. would that be right?

Response Yeah.

- **RQ1 > RQ2 > RQ3.**

The short essay, inspired by the short story, made the student break rules and at the same time (implicitly) appreciate and respect them.

SB Okay, so you enjoyed doing that then, would that be right?

Response Yeah.

SB Do you think you were able to say in the end what you could have said in a thousand word essay but you just said it in a different way or did you feel that there's a lot you haven't been able to say in there?

Response Definitely constrictions but if you make a valid argument even in 128 words, it's an argument nonetheless and it's like if it's, if it was a thousand words normally you want to know the snippets of what you think and stuff, like an article that's how they do it.

- **RQ2** Very confident expression of enjoyment and very confident articulation of an argument, with its suggestive potential suggested – terrific insight.

SB Okay but if you weren't able to say all the words you wanted to say, is there an issue here, are we expecting to have a cleverer reader, do you think the reader who reads this 128 word essay has to be more clever than a thousand word essay reader?

Response No I think it's more, I approached it as I was talking to a friend, like trying to be equal. With the thousand word essay I feel it's more formal, and I was actually doing it for you or a lecturer it would be more pragmatic.

SB But if you were leaving things out in here or you were using it in a certain form and you've got this thing where you're talking to us and talking to somebody and you're moving between describing this woman walking and not, do you think that means that your reader has got to be quite agile as well?

Response Yeah. I think so. I never really thought about that. I just find with writing I just write and then if it doesn't make sense to the person then I will be explaining it.

- **RQ1** Short story and the implied reader.

This also connects with Harkin's exposition of reader-response (2.4.2).

SB Well in a sense that's what a thousand word essay does because you go through all the protocols and the protocols are quite reassuring. But if you're in fine art practice or any sort of creative practice you're not going to be there standing next to the person who's looking at the work either so what do you do? Do you actually write something that goes next to the work or do a practitioner statement at the beginning of the exhibition?

Response I don't know. If it was set with the brief with it then it sort of makes more sense if my stuff doesn't make sense.

SB Yeah but that's just a cop out. If you don't understand it, do you know what I mean and then after you die you're not there anymore to explain it, people will look at your work and think what on earth was she on about?

Response Well if people see my work and some of us get it.

- **RQ1** Short story needs to suggest. This is in order to survive and retain respect and inferential authority via permanence, a permanence which will elude the short story in novelistic-mode criticism because of the short story's putative lack of content. However, as has been discussed in the literature review, content must not be understood in reductive terms, and is as much to do with what the reader brings to the process. This point may be obvious to Harkin (2.4.2), but it is not emphasised enough in HE.

SB Looking at it they must get it, that's quite nice way of putting it. I mean it is an issue but it's an interesting question isn't it about how much we have to explain about a piece of work and in a sense that what you're saying about the essays is the more formal it is or the more familiar and conventional it is then to a certain extent it's all excused by its format and is self-explanatory. If you do something like this and you're in new territory then presumably you're relying on people to participate, would that be right?

Response Yeah.

- **RQ1** Short story suggests.

See literature review discussion of implied readers and communities of readers via vague language (2.4.3).

SB So although you say you didn't think of it necessarily, I don't want to ask you a leading question but looking back do you think your writing for quite a sophisticated reader?

Response I feel like I'm writing, I don't know, I feel like I'm writing for a sort of, when I was doing it I felt like I was writing for myself so it didn't need to make sense. If I think about the reader it has to be like minded, if the person reading an exact square then they have to be a bit like minded in a sense.

- **RQ2** Vague language creates communities (see above) – but one can never be absolutely sure, and therein lies the risk (see literature review, 2.4.3).

SB They're still going to, it's that thing where you just, they're going to be aware of the restriction so in a sense you don't have to explain anything do you, it's all kind of self-explanatory, it's just there in a block. It's a bit like forcing yourself to I guess work for a piece of work that cost a pound produce a piece of work which takes you an hour, any of those things are putting restrictions aren't they, would that be right?

Response Definitely.

- **RQ3** Direct link to practice.

SB Did you enjoy the restriction then of that 128 words?

Response Yes I prefer there to be some sort of, some boundary so I know that I don't go over.

SB You can't work with an open brief?

Response Yeah I remember when we had the fine art, we had a 6 x 6 square and I thought okay there's a brief but it was just too big so I decided to fill out the whole thing.

SB 6 x 6 what?

Response Feet

SB You couldn't say, you wanted to make it smaller? It's still a restriction though isn't it?

Response It was a restriction but it was a massive one so then I ended up filling the whole of it.

SB Yeah it's a constraint but we tend to think of constraint as being something which is small but actually it's just as difficult, it's still a constraint, still a requirement which is forcing you into, boxing you into a corner intellectually and creatively and you've got to get out of that corner. I suppose I could have done it the other way and said it's got to be a minimum of 2,500 words. You've got to make it fit a square. The bad news is the square is two metres by you know. Well it did happen actually with the third years, this is a slight digression. Third year graphics a couple of years ago got them to write an essay which was exactly five pages long.

Response They had font size and stuff?

SB Yeah and in fact Foundation a couple of years ago did one where it had to be in columns and they had to write a column but they could change the font size but they had to make the columns work. There was one girl with a graphic design one, she wrote pages and said it's much too long, it doesn't fit, I can't bear to edit it and I said how can you make it fit five pages. 6 point type. It was a miniscule thing. It's another way of using restrictions. But coming back to this then, did you see this thing as just an essay and do you think anything you got from it you can apply to your practice or is it just hermetically sealed as an essay you've done or can you sort of think well actually I learnt from that or I enjoyed doing that and I'll think of that when I do my next piece of work?

Response Originally I thought of it as a fun essay, I saw it more as a sort of more focused more on the square. But in my work I don't think it's affected it.

SB Okay so it was just an essay and that was the essay and that was that. Would it have been helpful then if after you've done it if I'd actually sat down with you and said this is what you've done, why did you do it, what words did you use and so on to try and articulate how you'd achieved it and then see if that, so you were more conscious of what you'd done and why you'd done it?

Response Yeah I would have liked to have know more consciously why I could have done certain things differently but again to go back to my art, then probably it doesn't fit as much into context with what I'm doing at the moment.

SB Okay so it's not connected. But there are certain words that you might have used that are different and at the end of it, your reference was it Sophie Rickets that you had in mind?

Response Yes.

- **RQ3** Essay needs connection to practice.

SB I was reading some short stories yesterday that started off with exactly that thing, they were American short stories and a girl who said exactly that because she wanted to be, she wanted to pee standing up, so she taught herself to do that. Is there anything else you want to add to that [REDACTED] at all that you want to mention about it?

Response For me I think the last sentence I had the perfect way of saying it and then I couldn't.

- **RQ3** Practice governed by constraint: another lesson to be integrated into process more forcefully. Frustration is part of the delight of creativity, if only because it helps to perpetuate it.

SB What was wrong, you couldn't fit it in?

Response What was it, when writing command the shoes were just one measure towards, it was more like the women are rising as power, the shoes were just one step towards women

SB Standing up and you couldn't fit that?

Response Yeah.

SB Right so it didn't quite say what you wanted it to say in that respect, so the form dominated the content?

Response Yes.

SB Is there not a message in there then for your practice – that's what I'm getting at?

Response I suppose so. Well my stuff at the moment is, I'm doing sort of mind numbing as mentality and I was more focused on the title than I was on trying to find out other stuff which I might relate to because the form was, I don't know.

- **RQ1, RQ3** Writing tasks, as defined by the short story informing the short essay, relate to practice.

SB Obviously in here, I suppose what I'm trying to get at really is obviously in here you have to juggle form and content, you've discovered that and some people did it and some people articulated it and they might do in the interviews with me and so on but I'm just interested in whether or not you were able to then sort of make that leap between that and the next thing that you did, I mean to say the presentation for example. I asked you to do the presentation a week or so after that, did anything that you sort of struggled with in there when you were doing your presentation were you consciously thinking at all of the essay and the difficulties fitting things in when you did the presentation or did you just think that's another job?

Response I thought it was, I thought to be more creative in the, when we had to do the presentation.

SB What you felt you could do that?

Response Yeah.

SB Because of this?

Response Yeah.

- **RQ3** Essay prompted creative practice.

SB In what way were you more creative, you did pretty well. You've had all these grades back, you got 90.

Response Really, I didn't see that. Awesome.

SB Inventive 100, type 90 and that was your presentation. That was [redacted] and [redacted] and I think [redacted]. There were two or three people looking at presentation at the time so because the presentation came right after that then, are you saying that sort of suggested that you could do something a bit different in your presentation?

Response It was the idea that I did the thing where I put my hands through the paper, the reason I thought was because of the essay and like the squares.

- **RQ3** Practice link.

Note the literature review discussion of Tonfoni (2.2.5) and the criticism of her use of the square as a purely representational and arbitrary sign instead of something with endless (in the sense of continuous and measurably discernible) perfection which is not, like the circle, premised on an illusion (the circle being technically made up of infinite points and not a continuous line).

SB You didn't have the pieces of paper that rocked?

Response I'm not sure, no I don't think so.

SB Somebody had some 3D things which rocked, it wasn't you.

Response Not sure.

SB To be clear then what you did in your presentation was to a certain extent inspired by what you were able to do in the essay because of what breaking rules or because it was an unusual format kind of thing?

Response It was the format, so I emphasised the form more in the presentation.

SB Because this essay was, the form was emphasised more to you because you were working within the square?

Response Mm.

- **RQ2** Inspires risk.

Is this what we mean by risk now? Just doing something different and not being governed by absolutes? See literature review, 2.3.4.

SB So my question then to myself is how do I then get that to be always in people's, in front of people's minds. Whether or not we sort of say to people all the time you should do it in your sketch books or just do it occasionally. Yeah I've often wondered whether or not I shouldn't at the end of the academic year say to people, get all their sketch books together and do 128 word essay which has got everything in there, into one thing to come and compress it all. Are you ever going to do one of those again?

Response I hope so, it was fun yeah. I'd like to do that again.

- **RQ3** Enjoyment an essential part of creativity. This must not be confused with having things easy, and having things one's own way. Part of this study's conclusion is to recommend the long-term, and in this sense enjoyment might only come after prolonged discomfort, frustration and unhappiness. Creativity should *not* be easy, or else the risk is minimised.

SB When you were doing your personal statement did you think back to the essay at all?

Response In the sense of making form?

SB The sense of picking certain words. You mentioned that you were frustrated because you couldn't say one step, so did that make you then consider which words you had to use in a personal statement because you're aware of the different meanings?

Response Well I don't know if it was to do with this essay, I did do it but I might have just been because I was doing English literature I would have

SB There's no way of knowing whether it's particularly this essay or not?

Response Yeah.

SB Obviously this is frustrating, you couldn't say what you wanted to say and I'm interested if then that frustration sticks in your mind and having become frustrated by not being able to say what you wanted to say, if that then became something you were aware of when you were working in your practice, that there is always that limitation.

Response Yeah I find that is what happens, you always have a bit of limitation whether it's if you don't have enough space or if you don't have enough technology to work with what you want to work with, you have to find the alternative or even just trash it and start again, yeah it definitely works alongside the idea of the essay.

- **RQ3** Practice clearly involves limitations and frustrations: the essay highlights that.

Note the last phrase, above: creative practice works alongside the idea of the essay – the essay should not be quarantined from practice. This tends to happen in HE, despite the best of intentions: the writing tends to be seen as a piece of writing and not as a piece of practice.

SB In a sense I think you were saying earlier on weren't you that you quite liked the idea of a restriction, a limitation, it's quite a nice thing to have. If you didn't have a restriction then presumably this essay is one way of at least creating a restriction, so you could almost force one upon yourself.

Response I think I need to force, my views are very flaky so if I have something to set me in line, yeah I'm a roller coaster with no brakes sometimes.

- **RQ1** The short story imposes controls but in so doing it liberates.

SB That's not a bad thing is it?

Response I don't know it sounds a bit scary.

SB You'd stop sooner or later it's just that you're going faster and faster all the time. Momentum is building up.

Response The restriction is kind of the art I think, definitely that came through in a lot of my stuff.

SB Because of this or just normally?

Response No I found that just on the foundation course.

SB Generally.

Response Yeah, it emphasised it when I did the essay. I felt more, I felt I had to look for the limitations so that I could actually go further in my work because if you had no, it's just everywhere, like you could have anything you wanted to do.

- **RQ3** Restrictions part of creative practice.

As is seen in the literature review, restrictions can be misunderstood and thus they can break one's spirit (2.3.4). Restrictions are physical in the plastic arts – that much is not in dispute. However, the essay is intended to use physical restrictions to bring practitioners' inner restrictions to the surface, to help them manage and overcome their own intellectual restrictions. It is too easy to blame plastic restrictions: how one deals with truly creative restrictions is the interesting part.

SB Sure, but it would have been good, I mean the thing which is coming through is it would have been good to have sat down and been able to explain or discuss where those limitations were, where you couldn't say what you wanted to say?

Response Mm.

SB It's a bit like in the *Iliad* where they say that there's a lot of repeats in the *Iliad* and it's a lot to do with the fact that it was spoken out loud and he had to conform to a metre so people couldn't think of anything to say, they said it twice. So you got the sort of uneven emphasis on certain events, not because they're really important but just because it fits the metre. I kind of like that. That kind of comes across in people's practice, that randomness about things because whether it's to do with a film or painting or anything like that where you're just trying to make something sort of work and you emphasise something people say or why have you done that and you say why not. Give me a good reason why I shouldn't have done it. This has been really helpful, is there anything else you want to add or ask me or anything?

Response No not offhand.

04

SB Obviously this essay isn't one like most essays I'm assuming, was it quite different?

Response Very different

SB In what way?

Response It was the limitations on words and the accurate space you have to use and getting it exactly in the box, quite difficult

SB Did you enjoy that?

Response I did I found it challenging. Made you really think

SB In what respect did you think?

Response I had to choose words that were adequately describing the way I felt but at the same time constantly having it in my mind that it's got to be in this box and it's got to be so many characters long

- **RQ2** Challenge;

- **RQ3** The project made the student think; the essay connected words with plasticity.

SB Okay, this is what we need to say tomorrow. I remember when I had your feedback, sorry that I had your first one and I gave you feedback and I suggested that somewhere in the middle you'd repeated yourself a little bit and I made suggestion of where you could look at documents to check out. Do you remember that?

Response Yes.

SB Did you find that those restrictions did they make you think about fashion at all or were you just thinking about writing the essay?

Response I was thinking about fashion because I was aware that I had to make it relevant so obviously I was thinking of fashion as well but it was more of a concern about the words and fitting them in the box, really researching that.

- **RQ3** Practice in mind.

SB If you'd done a thousand word essay, would you have researched more about fashion?

Response Oh yes.

SB So the thousand word essay you think you might have discovered more about fashion itself?

Response Yeah.

SB So do you feel you didn't learn that much then from doing this essay?

Response I felt I learnt more of a creative way of putting across my feelings as opposed to more of fashion, more of an English sense as opposed to fashion.

SB So nothing to do with your subject area, but abstract and creativity making something fit?

Response Yeah absolutely, it helped me with that definitely.

SB In what sense, when you say it helped you in what sense?

Response It made me think about what I was going to do. It made me consider it more whereas if I was writing a thousand words then I'd ramble on a bit whereas I had to nit pick tiny little bits and then come together.

- RQ3 Practice link.

The important point in this exchange is the contradiction: the student claims the 1,000-word essay would have helped her more with fashion, but then comments on the help in fitting gained from the 128-word essay. There is an important conclusion to be made in this study about recognising just what creativity and creative practice really are.

SB And that nitpicking is that part of your, anyone's creative practice or is it just in an essay. When you're doing fashion design do you nitpick like that and look for details and make something fit?

Response Yeah I do I think yeah. You mean throughout my annotation work?

SB No I just mean is there a connection between the kind of mental exercise you have to do to make that fit and between making a garment work, do you see what I mean, the relationship between what you can say in a garment and its restrictions and what you could say in here in the restrictions of shape. Is there a parallel?

Response I guess there would be yeah, you go through a process of cancelling, you come with ideas and you come to create a garment and you cancel things off a list in your head to a degree and it's very similar to what I did there, you go through a mental list and think that won't work and then that works and you just like make a little mental note, jot them down. It's the same as making a garment.

- RQ3 Link to practice articulated here.

This connects with the literature review discussion of Tonfoni (2.2.5): my project is not intended to mimic creative practice but to replicate its cognitive processes where possible: suggestion plays its part in keeping the identification of that particular agenda dynamic and tensile.

SB I had to kind of make that connection for you just now, would it be right to say that you hadn't made that connection when you did the essay then yourself, between that and your design work?

Response I wouldn't say I'd be aware of it at the time but having thought about it now, yeah.

SB So would it have been useful then if after you'd done the essay if there was some way in which I could have discussed it with you or whatever to have made you sort of in a sense bring to the surface what you had to do in there, do you see what I mean, so you could then apply that to your practice.

Response I think you consciously gain from it. I don't think it's necessary that you bring it up. It's something that you're not aware of and it's helped and it will work the same with fashion design.

SB So in a sub-conscious way it's part of and you absorb it and apply it?

Response Yeah.

- RQ3 The link to practice needs to be articulated – by practice and not by interviews.

SB Did you do that in your...of this essay, having done this essay, because you had the feedback from the essay before you did the presentation. Did you sort of think I took a risk there, I can take a risk in the presentation or were they not connected?

Response I think I was careful of the wording I used during my presentation. You mean the, I see sorry I'm going off, the visual presentation right. Yeah, sorry.

SB What I'm wondering is you took certain risks here and because in a sense you couldn't say what you wanted to say and you put some words into capital letters and so on and so forth, did you, when you did your presentation a week or so after this, did you kind of think well I got away with it in the essay, I was able to take a risk, I was able to try something out, I will try something out in my presentation or did you just have them as two completely separate activities in your head?

Response I did consider them two quite separate activities, mainly because obviously I could put down in words how I was feeling and I could express that quite clearly through my words and choice of words whereas with the presentation I couldn't do words. I had to kind of figure out how I could portray how I was feeling through the images and that was hard.

SB But you only had two minutes and eight images. There was a restriction and here you only had a square and 128 words to do as a restriction but there was no connection in your mind between those two exercises then.

Response I personally saw them as quite different because of that difference.

- RQ3 There are no guarantees – see above point about articulation.

SB One was words and one was...

Response Yeah. I considered them quite separate. Very equally as challenging I'd say but very separate in my mind.

SB When you wrote that do you think you did consciously take a risk, did you try something out?

Response Yeah.

SB What kind of things?

Response Wording and I was aware that it wasn't necessarily good English a lot of the way I was writing in that essay so that was a risk in itself because I didn't want someone to read it and think that doesn't make sense.

SB But can you get away with not good English in an essay like that?

Response I believe you can yeah, to a degree yeah I believe you can.

- RQ1 Short story uses the subversive techniques of the marginal.

However, as we have seen in the literature review, the short story needs credibility and authority (2.5.4): it cannot be inarticulate. It has to work, and vague language – as we see articulated above – can play a legitimate part, a part legitimised by the short story's heritage and form: a 'perfect' synthesis.

SB But if you were doing a thousand word one?

Response I'd think that I'd have to be a little more professional. I don't know why.

SB Is it a bit more conventional, a bit more formal?

Response Yeah I think a bit more standard.

SB And you feel that if it's standard then there are certain ways that you should be expressing yourself and ways that you shouldn't.

Response Yeah.

SB Do you find those stimulating those kinds of, because that's a restriction in itself or do you think that's just a process you go through and you just write what's expected of you in a standard essay?

Response Yeah the latter of the two really.

SB Did you enjoy doing a short one?

Response I did. I prefer that as opposed to the thousand ones because that's challenge to me whereas I think a lot of people, myself definitely, I could produce a standard thousand word essay quite easily I'd say whereas that is more challenging because I have to take risks in that.

SB Do you feel proud of what you've done in that?

Response I did in the end yes.

- RQ2 Breaking out of norms (and enjoying it...in the end).

The literature review discusses writing in HE for visual arts students, its original aims and its well-intentioned but arguably unclear inclusion in visual arts courses (2.2.2).

SB Did it take you as long as doing a thousand word one do you think? It's hard to tell isn't because you didn't do that but do you think it took longer than you expected for something as short as that?

Response It did absolutely. I think I would have completed a thousand words a lot quicker than I did that.

SB Because people often think that the fewer words the easier it's going to be.

Response Yeah I did think that.

SB But it turned out to be harder in the end?

Response Yeah.

SB So you enjoyed it, you took a couple of risks on it. You felt that your English wasn't, you could get away without using proper English let's say, would that be right?

Response Yeah.

SB And is that just because it was an unusual format?

Response Yeah because I think it was a bit different, exciting I thought pushing the boundaries a little.

- **RQ1** Short story – as discussed in the literature review (2.5.2) – can have an increasingly exciting range of delimitation modes: length alone is not the issue, and length alone becomes meaningless, as the simple comparison between *Clarissa* and *The Idiot* demonstrates.

- **RQ2** Student clearly articulates risk here as well.

SB So how do we then get you to apply that thinking then to a piece of design work that you do, there's a parallel isn't there? In a sense, if it's a different shape or different format or different whatever, you can take certain risks, we understand that. In a way it's a like an abstracted example of a piece of design work isn't it? You've got that trade-off between what you can fit and how you say it and what people are expecting.

Response Yeah.

SB That's a trade-off but what I'm concerned about is whether or not we, how that then translates into the work that you do in the studio that you were saying earlier on that's subconscious.

Response Yeah I'd say it's definitely subconscious. It's something you wouldn't be aware of the fact that it's helped in that sense but I have noticed in my own work, especially for my FMP [Final Major Project] now that I'm considering things that maybe at the start of the year I'd be almost too afraid to do in a way, think oh no that's a bit risky or like especially for my FMP I'm considering using some quite shocking images to print onto a garment that at the start of the year I'd never have considered doing because they're quite disturbing images and yeah I don't think I'd have had the guts to do that.

- **RQ3** Link to practice might not be directly attributable to the essay.

SB But that's not necessarily because of an essay though is it? That could be because you've done eight months of the Foundation course.

Response Yeah true.

SB Or do you think the essay was a part of that?

Response I think the essay has contributed definitely because it's made me experiment, even though it's with words, it's very similar to how I'm considering working on my project, whether that be through the choice of words or my actual design it is in a way I think it has contributed yeah slightly.

- **RQ3** Although, with reference to the point above, it has in this case, if only slightly.

The critical factor here is extent of attributable help: this will vary with every practitioner, and the study will recommend therefore proper integration of writing with coursework, as a piece of practice and not a superficial piece of mimicry (cf. Tonfoni, literature review, 2.2.5).

SB That's good to know because that's really what I'm trying to do, is to do something which in a way I'm not interested in this as a piece of writing, I'm interested in the impact it has on other things, I'm interested in, because most writing is looked at and assessed as a piece of writing. I'm looking to see what this writing does next, how it actually prompts people and pushes them and inspires them or suggests possibilities.

Response Yeah I think with the feedback you've given me from it, obviously that's a positive and you haven't criticised and said that isn't good English which is what I was expecting as feedback from it because even as I handed it in I thought ooh no, so hearing positive feedback from it gave me the confidence in a way.

SB When you say it's not good English, I mean surely a piece of creative work in a sense is the equivalent of not good English. I mean you're trying to design something otherwise people wouldn't, you'd never fashion a garment. Why not just wear everything that's been worn before so isn't part of it about breaking rules?

- **RQ3** Feedback needed as part of any implementation.

Response Yeah I think it's just my expectations or presumptions about creative writing. I thought you could only be creative to a certain degree without actually being able to really push it.

SB So did you think this was a piece of creativity that you did in there?

Response Yes.

SB And did you surprise yourself by what you were able to achieve?

Response Absolutely, writing's never been my strong point.

SB So in a sense then you did something you were proud of in that regard?

Response Yeah.

- RQ2 > RQ3 Autonomous risk part of practice.

This exchange also connects to the literature review in its unsure awareness of what creativity might be (2.3.2). The study does not aim to pin that down – it uses writing and the short story / short essay with their accomplice (provisional meaning) to rejoice in individuality and to encourage practitioners to be tough enough to claim their own territory.

SB Good. Do you think that you were able to say in terms of fashion, the points you made in there about what you believe about fashion and we discussed these in the seminar, do you think you were able to say as much in there as you could have said in the thousand word essay? I appreciate there's fewer words but do you think you made as many points or do you think you made your point with as much impact as you could have done in a longer essay if you were asked in a longer essay to argue that?

Response I think my points they have a stronger impact in this because of obviously the limitations on words. I had to go direct to the point without explaining too much about it. The way in which I wrote my essay is kind of like a political speech, I was shouting it.

- RQ1 Short story – form: awareness (see above), rhetoric and tone of voice...vital in any piece of creativity even if suppressed (it may seem sophistic but it is nonetheless true to claim that suppressing something alludes very clearly to its presence, and this forms an initial prop in provisional meaning: absence is presence, cf. Huckin, literature review 2.4.2).

SB I think I remember saying to you in your feedback it's a bit like a manifesto which is fine.

Response I like that about it because it was direct to the point whereas I think if I did a thousand words, sure I'd be able to get more points in and explain a lot more but I really don't think it would have half as much impact.

SB So you felt this one had more impact if there's not that many points made. Who were you, do you see what I mean, if you can't actually say very much but you make an impact, does that kind of achieve what you want to achieve because what does it do to the reader?

Response Directly telling them something as opposed to debating something I think which is probably the angle I'd have gone down had I a thousand words to do.

SB And if you tell them something, what if they don't agree with you?

Response I guess that's the beauty of it in a way because they can argue it out in their own mind, they can either agree with me massively or hugely disagree with me. Either way they'll feel something strongly from that.

- RQ1 > RQ2 The short story and the risk of being thought to say nothing at all.

I repeatedly stress to students, in my studio teaching, that one cannot legislate for an audience's reaction. With this Fashion student, this may be disputed because garments might be bought in huge numbers – but I reply that whilst that attests to the popularity of the garment it does *not* mean that the garment is *necessarily* going to be worn as the designer intended. The essay must help to raise the significance of suggestion in makers' minds, if only in the sense that one needs the measure of one's enemy.

SB And how does the shape and the format then contribute to that sense that they can argue it?

Response I don't know.

SB I suppose what I'm asking you is do you think your reader might understand that you're having to use certain words because of the shape and the format?

Response I think they would because of the limited, obviously the space in which it's laid out and the fact that I go directly to the point.

SB And they've probably not read anything like it before anyway.

Response Yes.

SB I'm kind of interested in who you think was your reader for that?

Response I don't know in a way. I guess somebody who, more a friend in a way that was about to get some horrible shoes. I guess in a way I'd argue with a friend telling them not to go and buy something.

SB Whereas when you write a thousand word essay, who are you writing that for?

Response You'd write it for maybe an examiner or a teacher that's going to read over it, somebody more professional.

SB So when you wrote this were you consciously thinking of who you might address it to or is it actually something you've thought of now?

Response A little. I made the decision to argue it as I was arguing to a friend right at the start because I felt if I put it in a nice way it wouldn't get my point across how I wanted it to.

- **RQ1** Provisional meaning as part of short story technique; the implied reader > **RQ3** as a basis for practice.

SB So the trick then is to think how do we, that's quite nice because what you're saying is what we should be doing in our creative practice, that you get your point across.

Response Yeah.

- **RQ2** Take the risk...

SB Thank you for those thoughts. Is there anything you want to ask or add to that?

Response No not at all.

SB If I gave you one of those again, would you want to do it?

Response I would actually, I really would.

...because now it's fun.

SB Well maybe I'll think about for the first year of Fashion then but mention it in your interview tomorrow. Take it with you, seriously and just say you did well on this and explain, you said to me in this thing what points you made. It's worth saying, not so much I suppose that you can write but also say that it made you think about fashion and that what you were able to do was to come to an understanding of certain aspects, certain debates. In here it's just about the genderisation of shoes, it's a big issue. So it's worth mentioning the reason. Thank you so much.

05

SB Obviously the essay was different to what you've done before.

Response Yeah quite a lot because it was difficult to express myself in 128 words and especially for someone like Andy Warhol because I still don't know, I don't have very opinion and the fact that I had to fit my sentence in the box and the lines had to be a certain number which made things more difficult but it was really challenging.

SB So in the end did you enjoy doing it?

Response Yes because it was like a mind game and if the deadline wasn't that strict I would have enjoyed it even more.

- **RQ2** Challenge as (enjoyable) part of creativity; enjoyment as (challenging) part of creativity > symbiosis.

SB If you had more time?

Response Yeah.

SB We would all like more time, but you don't know, maybe there comes a point where you have to say right enough finish, done. But that's another thing. In terms of the fitting into the shape you found that interesting?

Response Yes usually I find writing essays really boring and there are formal things you have to do but I really enjoyed it and I found out if I create things you can make those things more interesting because you have to be more risky about it.

- **RQ2** Risk is part of this, too (as distinct from, but not unrelated to, challenge).

SB So you felt that this gave you, you said more risky just now, did this give you an opportunity to take a risk?

Response Yes because for example where I space out the words, I didn't know how this would be and other things that I had done as well I don't know if they are fine to put in.

SB But this is an emphasis this everybody, where you're saying everybody. **Why would you not do that in a normal essay?**

Response I think I would just be afraid. I don't know if I would be allowed to.

SB In a normal essay?

Response Yes.

SB **But in this essay you felt you could, is that correct?**

Response Yes.

- **RQ2** the legitimisation of risk.

This connects to literature review discussions about what risk might be (2.3.2), and how writing might connect to practice. Much, if not all, the research shows a commendable endorsement of visual arts-specific writing, but disappointingly little commitment to detail, method, content or outcome. One has to start somewhere: this study's writing project is as good a place as any.

SB Why?

Response Because it was the only way to fit my sentences in the box and I just had to do something, I didn't have time to think for more synonyms.

SB **So the timing was useful in a sense because it was a rush?**

Response Yeah.

- **RQ2, RQ3** Challenge of timing: something to bear in mind.

SB And obviously you're from Greece and English is not your mother tongue. Did you find this more difficult to do or would a longer essay have been more difficult to do, to write in English?

Response Maybe longer would be more difficult but the thing is when we learn English in Greece, even have private lessons, we're given more formal writing or speaking.

SB Correct grammar or something?

Response Yeah so I used no more difficult and formal words and also there are many Greek words, for example my friends don't even know them and they're English because they've got Greek origins and they think that I am saying something really, I don't know how to say that, you know that word, they're like that and I might be using in my everyday life.

SB So they think you're being a little bit of, that you're showing off?

Response Yeah sometimes yeah.

SB When actually it's just an everyday word, okay. So obviously there's going to be no problems, but difficulties or something that you have to deal with about which words you might use if you're writing in English. **Did this shape in any way allow you to be more creative with what words you choose?**

Response Yes I was more creative. I was more creative in how I would write them for example space out again something else I had done and remembered. For example at some point I used two question marks.

SB Yeah and here two exclamation marks. Okay is that just to make it fit?

Response Yes.

SB Okay but this is presumably and you also used the symbol for and and the symbol for and in there. **So you had to kind of, it's like sculpture, you had to make something to shape it.**

Response Yes.

- **RQ1** Short story repeats: a very direct connection with a literature review specific (2.5.3), and the whole discussion of short story characteristics, of which there are many more, for example circularity of narrative, tone of voice (consistency) and sound (rhythms reified);
- **RQ3** Relates to practice.

SB So is that something that you would, this kind of craft in a way, it's like a craft isn't it?

Response Yes I guess yeah. I would prefer if each essay I write from now on, to be like that.

- **RQ3** Enthusiasm for challenges.

SB You'd like to do them like this?

Response Yes I'd love to.

SB What course are you going to apply for?

Response I was going to apply for Photography but finally I'm going to do Fashion.

SB Are you staying here in Coventry?

Response Yes.

SB You have an interview tomorrow?

Response I have on Wednesday.

SB I was saying to [redacted] that take this with you, show it to [redacted] and [redacted] because often I do some teaching on a fashion course on writing and things so show them that you've done this. I know that you chose Marilyn Monroe, they won't worry about that, but explain what you had to do, explain the brief, because they like people who can write and express themselves, so it's important that you do that. So you got this idea it's something you crafted, it's something you shaped, is that a similar thing to what you might do in the studio? Is there a connection between this and anything else or did you feel it was just something to write?

Response Maybe for the brief and every project that I have to do I have to do a long research and then I have to create something and include my research in this and all my feelings and sometimes it is difficult, that's why I'm using photography for my outcomes. It's a way, it gives me more space to express myself with photography if there is something that is missing from my outcome, I can add with my photography.

- **RQ3** Photography as outcome, and conclusion to exploration: very important point, because the essay must be seen as part of this process.

SB Do you write anything at all? Do you use writing yourself in any way in your development work, in your research and your sketchbooks?

Response Yes I have annotation in my sketchbook. I don't like that I have to write PebblePad it doesn't really help me but annotation helps me and I love writing in English as well. I don't like writing in Greek, I don't know why but I like writing in English.

SB Well that's interesting because most people would prefer, is that because it's a restriction?

Response Maybe it's because if I make grammatical mistake they won't that attention because I'm not from here but I don't think I have big problem with that, with my grammar and things. I just like it more, I don't know why.

- **RQ1** As in the short story (see literature review, and points above, severally): suggestion does *not* mean disregard for quality, abdication does *not* mean abandoning quality (2.4.2): the crux of this is about making writers and readers (makers and receivers) agree terms.

SB When you did this, did you worry about your grammar?

Response Yes.

SB You like to get the grammar absolutely right so doesn't that make it then more difficult for you because you have the shape, you have the length and the grammar.

Response Yes I check my grammar as many times as I could and if I don't know how was it but I hope it was fine especially for the specific essay.

SB You've had feedback?

Response Yeah but if I didn't like my grammar I would have, I wouldn't have sent without the correct grammar.

SB But that's just the way you work, that's your personal. I've read all of these and some of them break all the rules because they feel that they can break the rules. You said at the beginning that this was more risky but if you didn't break grammar then in what way were you being risky?

Response Maybe with the way I express myself, if I would be more narrative or if I had said funny, if it was more funny then there are more ways to take risk

- **RQ2** Risk – but not reductively defined or understood.

This also keys into literature review themes about intelligent risk (2.3.2), which of course cannot then be easily quantified.

SB So in the sense, it wasn't the grammar but it was your tone of voice, when you say if you're being funny, do you see a different reader here? Who is your reader in this essay. When you write an essay of a thousand words or 2,000 words who do you write that for?

Response If it was for more words I think it would be more about facts because I have the chance to say more about Andy Warhol and I would have to consider like more things for my reasons and it would be more facts but now I don't have the space to do anything about my research. I have to say my opinion. I didn't know my opinion about him and I still don't but that's why for example I have question marks or exclamation marks because they make it more direct and I am wondering what's about my opinion about him.

- **RQ1** Short story emphasis on shape creating meaning – not necessarily being meaning, but working with the reader / user to come to an agreement – which can of course be disregarded next time;

- **RQ3** Reflection prompted.

SB So the piece of writing has a different function to the other one, so you've given a few bits of information. You've put some question marks, you've asked the reader to participate, you've asked the reader because you're being a bit more provocative maybe with this piece of writing, is that how you meant it might be risky then in a sense?

Response Yeah.

- **RQ2** Risk and reader-response combined.

SB I don't want to put words into your mouth here but would that be right because in a sense you're not saying what you would say in a normal piece of writing, you're saying something different. That's why I was asking you about the reader. Do you think that your reader here has to be more intelligent or has to be more knowledgeable than the reader in the 1,000 word essay?

Response I don't think they have to have more knowledge because you can find things on the internet for example. You have to have the knowledge everywhere because you don't who has written something but I think that if someone read this they would, at the end of this they would wonder about Andy Warhol and (unclear) them.

SB I suppose it depends if you think your essay is about information or is your information about making somebody think?

Response Yeah I think it's to make somebody think. I think maybe if someone feels that Andy Warhol was an artist, the fact that I said he was a profound businessman and this is a fact how his work, the money he earned, it's a fact so maybe I could change someone's mind.

- **RQ2** Make the readers work – turn provisional meaning to your advantage. The danger is that the readers do not cooperate: in this case, one's message has to be suggested, and open to interpretation, to persuade readers to buy into the work. These themes are explored in the literature review (2.4).

SB That's what I'm interested in so good. Also you said business and business right one above the other, you said best art is good business, personally I believe he had a profound business. Now these two words one above the other and it does but if you are writing that in a traditional essay would you try to change that?

Response Yes, I would never

SB But you feel it was okay to do it because you had the square?

Response Yes.

- **RQ1** Short story repeats and the bewildering practice of repeats when space is tight.

- **RQ2** The form and the experience legitimises the risk.

It should be stressed here that once this essay form becomes a tradition it will lose its novelty value and become respected, untouchable: this study is not recommending an absolute of form. This study has analysed the literature and concluded that a mindset in writing assignments is more important than any particular form. However, the mindset must be guided and informed by understanding that plasticity is important, and that this paradox is what gives the project life.

SB So in a sense it encouraged you to be more well, it's something, when you did that did you realise that you had written business twice, one above the other?

Response Yes.

SB And you did that deliberately, consciously?

Response The business no I didn't do that from that point but when I saw it I liked it. I didn't want to change it.

SB Would it have been useful if after you wrote this essay, instead of me giving you the feedback and stuff like that would it have been good if I'd sat with you and asked you to explain these words and why you had done that, to try and get you to consciously explain it or were you happy to just...

Response I think that if we have talked about my essay before I had sent it to you it would maybe confuse me. This is what happens with my product. Sometimes I like tutorials but sometimes they might change my mind and then I get confused.

- **RQ2** Autonomy (this student submitted no draft: that particular process is not an automatic success, especially if autonomy is a key part of the agenda);

- **RQ3** Careful tutoring and coaxing is needed.

Cf. literature review points about writing guides and what is really needed, from a writer's point of view, as opposed to from a tutor's / assessor's point of view (2.2).

SB Too much coming in.

Response And it's difficult to agree with someone.

SB When you wrote this did you feel confident about that you thought I know what I want to say, it's good, I don't need any help?

Response My desk was in a mess from notes and information about Andy Warhol. I felt that I could write the essay in the box but the difficult part was to say my opinion about Andy Warhol, this was the most difficult.

- **RQ1** The short story is not short on content: this has been mentioned before and is a recurring literature review preoccupation and theme.

The short essay must not be short on content either, or else it simply becomes a short project, with proportionately less content. This is often done by course planners reducing the extent of a writing assignment by reducing the word count: naturally the content will suffer, or at least be proportionately less. In this study's assignment, as with the short story, there has to be as much content as ordered / required. Hence these students were given the same lectures and in the seminars told to get the same amount of material in, as those doing the 1,000-word version. They just had to do it differently, using different techniques and strategies.

SB Did you write it all as one big thing and then try to fit it afterwards?

Response Yes and I write on a piece of paper, I write the words in the end.

SB And then you put it on the computer and in the process of putting it onto the computer you change it from here as you type it?

Response Yeah.

SB Yeah I do the same as I type it different things come to mind. That's been lovely thank you very much indeed. It's a real pleasure to work with you and I hope you stay in Coventry, see you next year. Is there anything you want to add about the essay that I haven't asked?

Response No.

SB Thank you so much.

06

SB [REDACTED] thank you. These questions and things and your responses will be anonymised, I'll take quotes, something like that. I have all the ethical clearances to do it and you're welcome to read what I say at the end. This essay, you did very well in the essay and I just wanted to ask you a few things about it, about your reactions to it, presumably you got your feedback and you saw what you'd done and obviously it's a lot different to a normal essay I'm assuming so in what way was it different, how did you deal with those differences?

Response To start off the square, you had to really well like pick the words that fitted even though you wanted a specific word it wouldn't fit so you'd have to kind of rework it, that was different to a normal essay I'd say and then I don't know, I don't know what to say.

- **RQ2** Challenge.

SB You say you had to sometimes pick a different word, did you find that frustrating, it wasn't necessarily the word you first thought of?

Response Not straight in, it was just a different way to look at things, I didn't get frustrated, just reworking it.

SB So you didn't say I can't say what I want to say?

Response No.

SB Do you think you managed to say everything you wanted to say?

Response Yes I think so.

SB How can you do that though if it's 10 times shorter than the other one, how could you manage to say everything?

Response I think the subject that I chose it was quite an easy thing to get two arguments across in a short space, because they're quite defined points, well Andy Warhol's work.

SB So do you think then having that shape and that restriction actually helped you to focus the arguments at all?

Response Yeah I think so.

- **RQ3** Focus on practice.

SB So if I'd given you the same thing, if you'd had a thousand word one, might you have rambled more or might you, there's a difference I suppose between rambling and saying more, do you think you would have been as tight over a thousand words?

Response No I don't think so. I think if I had more words I probably would have repeated myself a bit and then rambled a bit and it wouldn't have been as good.

SB So in a sense you're saying as much but using fewer words?

Response Yeah.

- **RQ3** A good connection to practice that must be capitalised upon.

It is not just that the essay made students think in terms of economy: it made them think in terms of economy related to practice.

SB Okay do you think in a sense that that's a bit risky, that your reader might pick up on that or?

Response Maybe.

- **RQ2** Interestingly, the risk is sanctioned by provisional meaning: the student is unsure whether the reader might pick up on the point; Harkin will tell us that is because reader-response is commonplace. The risk is in the question of whether the reader picks up on the point, not in the point itself, further reinforcing the importance of mistrusting absolutes in this kind of assignment.

SB Do you think that your reader is a different reader for this short essay to the normal one?

Response Yes I guess someone that didn't necessarily like to read that much, maybe similar to a person that doesn't like to write that much. I don't like to write that much and I don't like to read that much. The kind of person that I am would just maybe like something short and sweet that they can just read but they'd still benefit from.

- **RQ1** Suggestion, provisional meaning, vague language, implied reader, community of readers implied, especially if the (creative practical) work is to have broad appeal.

SB Did this seem to you like a normal or familiar, obviously its different, but did you approach this in a way that you might have approached an essay at a college or school, or did you see it as something more creative that you could do.

Response It's not more creative than any essay I've ever read before, it was something completely different to what I had done before. I approached it in a more fun way than I have essays because I don't like writing essays anyway really.

SB Did you take it seriously even though you approached it in a fun way?

Response Yeah.

- **RQ2** Fun is part of gaining autonomy, at least as expressed here.

- **RQ3** Definitions of creativity and how it can be seen, evidenced and enjoyed might need to be a part of any teaching of this kind of assignment: this student clearly does not appreciate what s/he has achieved.

SB So that idea of something which you can approach in an enthusiastic way nevertheless you can still do something quite worthwhile?

Response Yes.

SB Do you feel proud of it?

Response Yes, I've never really positive feedback from my essays, maybe I should write all my essays like that

- **RQ3** It is different writing, and not adapted existing writing.
This is a familiar literature review theme (cf. Tonfoni, 2.2.5).

SB Maybe you should. What are you going to do next, after foundation.

Response I'm doing Illustration Graphics.

SB Upstairs with [REDACTED]?

Response Yes.

SB Well I don't know if you'll get an essay but you could always put one into your sketchbook or something like that. Do you write things in your sketchbook? Did you use writing at all?

Response I used text a lot but not really, I mean it is writing but it's really short like phrases. I use text in most of my projects because I like to think of interesting words or parts of texts.

SB Are they words that you dream up or that you take to somewhere else?

Response Yeah they've words, like one of my projects was like notes to myself and they were kind of things that I'd probably be able to apply to everyone. I made a little book of little phrases.

SB So you do write.

Response Yeah I do write, I just don't like to write these big extensive things, I like to write these little things.

SB Do you see writing then as part of your creative practice?

Response Yeah.

SB You're somebody who does, you see it as an output, something you produce but this was something in between wasn't it? It was quite creative in a way but it's not something you would put in your portfolio and say I did this.

Response I don't know, it can't hurt to put in the portfolio but yeah I'm not sure.

SB When you did your presentation a week or so after that, did you have any of that essay floating around in your mind when you did the presentation, did some of the thing you did in there, did you apply that to the practical project or **did you see them as two quite separate projects?**

Response **No I saw them as two separate things.** I don't know I got more confused with the second one. I wasn't really sure what we were supposed to do but **I definitely enjoyed the text more.**

SB Than the presentation?

Response Yeah.

SB Although you did very well in the presentation so confusion helps sometimes, the presentation was marked by lots of people too, there were two or three of us watching you. **So you didn't see them as connected at all?**

Response **No.**

- RQ2 Risk in domain-breaking, or at least extending practice.
This is pursued in the literature review (2.3.4).

SB What about when you did your personal statement? Was there anything that you go out of that do you think apply to personal statement or consciously?

Response Maybe not consciously but I don't know.

SB Subconsciously we don't really know do we?

Response No.

SB I'm not a psychologist, I can't get this out of you. But we've established that you enjoyed doing it?

Response Yeah.

SB Did you learn anything about Warhol from doing it or did you learn more about making things fit by doing it? Did you think it was more of a kind of shaping, creative exercise or was it more kind of a research exercise?

Response I already knew quite a bit about Warhol because I think he's quite an inspiring person anyway so I've always liked to read up on him, I watched the film *Factory Girl*, I looked at it about five years ago when it first came out because I like Warhol, **so it wasn't really stuff that I'd learnt about him it was more like the experimentative text and stuff.**

- RQ3 Content – practice should look outwards, if domain-awareness means understanding how to work with domains instead of breaking domain boundaries for the sake of it or respecting them out of timidity or ignorance.

SB What about some of the words that you did use, you've mixed for example quite a few, you said I believe this fella and you've got a mixture of some words in there, some quite casual words and some quite more formal words, why was that?

Response **Partly just trying to get it to fit. I guess it was also like a more playful thing like Warhol's work it's something that he's kind of redone in his style so it was me taking something that was already done, just changing it, making it more abstract so it was kind of his work coming through in a piece of text.**

SB What do you think you've learnt about making a piece of creative work from doing this essay? Have you learnt anything at all? You've done something creative in the essay, you're saying that the creative side...

Response **Yeah definitely, I think it's important to, like you want people to be interested, if you are using text like I am you want to use words that people will see and notice and take in, you don't want it to be something bland so the choice of words in what you write is important.**

- RQ1 The short story has content and intent: this is a familiar literature review theme (2.5.4).

SB But was the choice of words yours in this or to a certain extent affected by the shape?

Response It was affected by the shape yes but there could have been words that I chose, like less interesting. I think I opted to choose the interesting and more quirky words rather than just normal boring words.

SB You've repeated those brainwave, you understand that it's not merely a painting, it's a brainwave and it's the bloke establishing the brainwave, very stimulating, so you've got those two words appearing pretty well above each other in two lines. Does that bother you that there's a repeat there?

Response I'm trying to remember when I actually wrote the essay. I think sometimes it is just getting it to fit but

SB You've got smouldering and smouldering.

Response Yeah.

SB It is a repeat. I suppose what I'm asking you, do you think those repeats are okay in an essay like this?

Response Yes, I'm trying to relate it to the work I've done as well. I've used a lot of the same words over and over again so it's kind of like a mass production, like the words just keep appearing.

SB Sure, but why is it okay to use those to repeat words like that in an essay like this and not in an ordinary 1000 word essay?

Response I guess maybe people will remember the words and that will define like how they remember the essay because they'll pick up on the words that you pick, like Warhol's brainwave and stuff like that.

- RQ1 > RQ3 Short story characteristics can be linked to practice via appreciation of the formal.

SB There's nothing wrong with repeating words. I mean people do it all the time and bad authors try to find, it's called elegant variation where people try to find another word because they want to repeat the same word but then you get some authors who just say bosh, bosh, bosh and they just repeat the word and you might do the same in your practice. You might find your might find yourself repeating a mark or a stroke or a line or something like that. I'm just interested whether or not you felt that in this format essay you have more license to do those kinds of things than you would do in an ordinary extended piece of writing?

Response I think so.

SB Okay, that's what I'm after really.

Response But I think with the smaller one there's more chance or there's less chance of repeating words because you've got less, so there'd be less chance.

- RQ1 Interesting take on repeats, a literature review short story theme (2.5.3): with a short story the repeat might be more visible, but not just because of the way in which – or the time in which – the story is read (also a literature review theme – delimitation of the short story – 2.5.2), but simply because if the repeats are random and not contrived then they will not appear so frequently in a given piece of text and thus not appear much at all in a very short story. This is connected to the literature review discussion about truncation versus compression, and six-word sagas versus tweets (2.5.4).

SB But in proportion yeah I suppose so. You've got 10 times, it's 10 times shorter than other ones so in a sense you've got, I see what you mean. That's quite an interesting notion. If you're trying to say brain wave and you're trying to find a different word for it in a thousand-word essay and there's only another version of it, another synonym for it, you've got fewer synonyms to play with, that's quite a nice idea actually. Even that though is a kind of piece of creative thinking about the shape of it. Is there anything you want to ask or add to the experience of doing that thing?

Response Not really I enjoyed it, it was good fun and definitely a new opening experience, it's always good to do something new.

- RQ1 > RQ3 The concentration on the formal is enjoyed, the challenge is embraced. As has been discussed above, the project must not atrophy: one way to do this is to use the principle of suggested, provisional meaning but in a different way: get the writers to do the delimitation. This is discussed in my paper 'I came here to draw, not to write' (Appendix 5).

SB You did very well so thank you very much.

07

SB I just wanted to talk to you [REDACTED] about the short essay and also to reassure you that I have, I won't quote you by name or anything like that in my PhD so you can say whatever you like now and I have all the ethical clearances to interview you and you're welcome to see what I'm write if you want to. It's not about you as a person compared to somebody else but I might say something like well one student had this reaction, a different student had that reaction and this demonstrates that all students felt the same way kind of thing. It's not about saying this student got 73% and that one got 85%, it's nothing to do with that so don't worry in that regard. Presumably this essay was quite different to essays you've done before?

Response Yes.

SB Tell us a bit about how it was different and whether you enjoyed the differences?

Response I've got a background in literature so I've got a Baccalaureate in literature so I used to write a lot and that was a short essay and so I felt restricted a lot.

SB But doesn't a long essay restrict you in some ways, traditions and conventions of a long essay?

Response Yeah but it's easier because I like to write a lot. I like to expand what I'm saying and here I can't explain everything and I don't know a bit restrictive.

SB Was it frustrating?

Response I don't know.

SB Did it make you angry?

Response Not angry but I don't know, just not used to, like I've done philosophy and you have to explain every little bit of it and you have to write the longest thing you can write and here it was just a really small, so you have to choose the main element, the thing that you really, really want to say and that was a bit frustrating because I made some research before, I looked at logos, I looked at many things and I thought oh my gosh how am I going to explain my point?

- **RQ1** The student wants to ramble. However, no text should sustain rambling, hence *Clarissa* needs to be 1,500 pages long and cannot be turned into a short story without that story having a life of its own if it is to have any integrity. This is discussed in the literature review in regard to tweeted stories not having the content – the shortness being no excuse – of full-length ones (2.5.4). Integrity means any story is full-length, even micro-fiction. Being short does not mean it lacks content: it means it is short.

SB In such a short space, so how did you? How did you get round this problem?

Response I think I wrote, if I remember I wrote everything I thought then I cut heaps of it.

SB So you wrote a full long thing and then take one word in 12 and do that, okay? So do you think you said, did you make as many points as you wanted to make or that you could not expand upon the points or did you make not as many points?

Response Probably not as many points because when you write a point you want to explain a bit as well so you can't.

- **RQ2** This student did not rise to the essay's challenge.

- **RQ3** In fact, as will be seen later in this interview, this student used the essay as a stepping-stone to the next project, the presentation, and this was the intent (see above blue comments throughout) – the aim of the writing was to work with future creative endeavour and not to be evaluated in any way as a discrete piece of writing.

SB Why do you want to explain?

Response I don't know, because I feel like people can't get my point so I have to explain what I think.

SB But do you not think that an intelligent reader just needs to be reminded of the point and then they can do some work themselves?

Response Yeah but they'd do their work so they won't get my impression.

SB So you don't like the idea that they do the work?

Response I don't know, because they can't get you properly, it's a bit like an artwork, if you don't explain anything people will be like that's it and another one will be like oh that means this and the other one that means this.

SB I'm interested in this so what you're saying it seems to me that you're concerned that you would like people in your writing and to a certain extent in your art work to get the point that you're making. You don't want them to get the wrong end?

Response Exactly. That's the other thing, yeah.

SB So you want it to be absolutely explicit?

Response Mm.

SB How can we do that in people's work? How can we make sure that people understand it just as you want it understood?

Response I don't know, in the quantity maybe, the more you write and the more you can explain. At first when you said that the essay is short I thought yes that's fine, that's easy but actually it wasn't that easy and at the end I was like maybe I would prefer the longer one.

SB But why? Because you feel you could say more or because you feel

Response Say more.

- **RQ1 > RQ2** This connects with the short story's agenda of provisional meaning (2.5.4), and specifically with Cook's comments (discussing vague language) about Milton (2.4.3), where he clearly states that the poem can be interpreted by readers but will always be seen as a discourse on Christian orthodoxy and not comic, for example. This student is clearly concerned with the agenda of provisional meaning – this suggests that both pre- and post-essay work with students should consider this, because it is to a large extent outside practitioners' hands in any case. As we saw with Harkin (2.4.2), we may not like reader-response, but one cannot prevent readers or any other receivers of creative work from coming to their own conclusions. We can, however, learn to work *with* this phenomenon.

SB But what about the construction of this essay, making it fit and all those things, did you enjoy that side of it or did you just find it annoying?

Response I hate to count. The problem with the statement of intent we have to count every single word and there's no point about it because you have count yourself.

SB So you wrote a novel, you're going to be like writing a Victor Hugo, colossal pages?

Response Yeah probably!

SB You're going to have to edit your work at some point aren't you?

Response Yeah but I missed the writing part. I like the creative, I miss writing a bit.

SB Well I don't know about your course but some courses have dissertations. The graphics course does a dissertation. We do an essay at every level which I think is a good thing but going back to this one you didn't think of it as a creative exercise then, fitting it in, you just thought of it as irritating?

Response Yes.

SB It was annoying?

Response Yes.

SB Is that because you're familiar with writing and you felt this was a way of writing that you didn't respect?

Response It's just the counting, if you say fill a page that would be fine but like write 100 words and you have to count every single word, that's the part.

SB What if I'd said write one page?

Response Yeah, it can be like a small page, a big page whatever, but I don't like to count the words.

SB If I just said to you fill the square, would that have been better?

Response I think so. It's the same thing but different. I wouldn't have to count.

SB No you could take lots of different sizes of text.

Response Yeah.

SB And that would have given you more freedom?

Response I think so.

SB But it would have introduced more problems.

Response I don't think so.

- **RQ3**

As commented above, this is an interesting case: this student needed convincing.

SB Okay you would have preferred that. Did you find when you were doing this one you had to change words occasionally to

Response Yeah, had to change, yeah I wrote the thing and then I had to change some words, because you know what you want to write but you've got that restriction.

SB But if you were designing, you're an interior designer right, you're designing the interior of an office, and you start off and all of a sudden they come to you and say look I'm sorry we need to take two thousand pounds off the budget and we need to, isn't that the equivalent of that, suddenly you cannot be as expansive as you want to be, it's a restriction?

Response No sorry I don't feel like it's the same, because I don't know. I don't mind working with restrictions, if you tell me like you have to work with that much, not another material, okay that's fine but not writing and counting every single word.

- RQ3

As with creativity, clearly there needs to be some teaching about just what restrictions are (not forgetting that these are Foundation students and thus perhaps, in some cases, quite anxious and reluctant to debate).

SB Seriously I'm interested, I don't mind what your answer is, I'm just interested that it obviously just didn't do it for you did it?

Response No.

SB And you don't think

Response The subject was really good. I really liked the subject but there was just that thing like the number of the words. I could have wrote a lot more.

SB So should I say to you okay, write me 2,000 words by the end of this term?

Response I think I'd rather do that.

SB Why don't you do it? I'd be happy. If you have spare time.

Response Yeah why not? Really the subject was really, really good.

- RQ2 This, and points made above, highlight literature review points (2.3.2) concerning the nature of risk (which are inextricable from concerns about the nature of creativity).

SB But you could, this is a separate thing, but you could choose. If you want to write an essay, have you had an interview yet for your course?

Response It's Saturday morning, tomorrow.

SB Take the essay that you've done, because everyone likes to see that you can write, take it with you and just say, is it you're having the interview with?

Response Yeah.

SB And I know to talk to and stuff and just say to him, you did this thing with me, you're interested, it's frustrating because you wanted to expand and that we had this conversation about constraint, about restriction, because that's what it comes down to. You were frustrated by the restrictions and because you felt you couldn't express yourself and you have a way of working it seems to me where you like people to get the point and not to be

Response I don't mind if people don't get the points but I'd like them to get more points as well. I don't want them to be like oh yes she's right, that's not what I mean like I know what she means.

- RQ1 > RQ2

See above with reference to Cook in the literature review (2.4.3). This student was getting a little confused, but that is the point: the essay *should* be opening things up and not closing them down. Confusion is not the aim, but remorseless clarity is not either: the literature review is clear about this in relation to the short story (2.5), which Bayley describes as not intended to prevent curiosity. In this case here, the curiosity can be explored in subsequent creative, practical work.

SB That's important. I'm happy for you if you want to just for your own pleasure if you wanted to do something on that subject about simplicity and complexity that would be interesting but to come back to this, so it didn't work for you. Okay if this essay was not satisfying because it was too short, in the wrong format, not as you were used to it, all of those things, so in a sense you're saying that this essay isn't really the kind of thing you like to do?

Response Yeah.

SB Right, if I was very brutal in my criticism of this essay, would you be upset?

Response Yeah.

SB Would you be more upset than if I was brutal in my criticism of some of the work you did in interior design?

Response No I don't think so because if I like what I'm doing, if you don't like it but if I'm not happy with what I'm doing and you say it's bad I'd be really upset because

SB I'm just wondering if with your own work, the work that you do in the studio, your interior design work, you feel that you own that work, it's you.

Response Yeah.

SB But with this work you think it's just...

Response Actually when we had the feedback I was a bit like, because my feedback was not really good and I thought I could have done better and I was a bit annoyed.

- RQ3

Ownership of the work matters. This can be a problem, especially in assessment-heavy regimes such as contemporary HE, if one is expecting the essay to be disposable. This point was not explicitly raised with this student, but might be implied for future applications.

SB Well you didn't say enough I don't think. Yeah you could have said more but you did extremely well in your presentation didn't you? And I'm using this essay as, I'm not really interested in the essay as something, I'm not interested in the writing, I'm interested in how that writing helps you in the next project. So do you think that anything you did in there, when you did your presentation were you conscious of what you'd done?

Response Yeah I was.

- RQ3

A link to subsequent practice has been articulated. Crucially, the student did not have to like the essay to be able to react to it.

SB In what way?

Response I didn't want to fail it or do anything wrong, exactly the same with the assessment, the first assessment it wasn't really good so I worked harder for the second one and the second one was good.

SB So the presentation, one of the reasons I wanted to interview you and I've interviewed quite a few people, because your essay was very conventional. You didn't do very well, but your presentation was outstanding, it was really interesting because I remember you moved things around and you had things animating and there were three of us or two of us looking at your presentation. We were both sort of wow this is really different. That was very good. So I was impressed by that. But you didn't actually sort of use anything that you had done within the essay to do with restrictions or anything like that, did you use that to inform the way you did your presentation? For example did you think I wasn't very creative in the essay, maybe I need to be more creative in this?

Response Yeah exactly.

SB You did that?

Response Yeah. Because when I saw the feedback I knew that I didn't do really well, but I want to make something else and I remember you, because I sent it to you by mail and you said oh you can do maybe your thing with lots of questions and I did it but I didn't do it on time so I didn't send it to you but I thought doing it, I was at home doing all these questions and then I thought it's too late I'm not going to send it and I had my feedback and I thought I wished I sent it.

- RQ2

The risk was in the next piece, not the essay.

SB But do you not think, if you'd done all that thing with all the questions, you were saying you quite like expansive essays, if you'd done that thing with all the questions, isn't that like a very short, like a poem which is just

Response (unclear) like you open a question and then people can think, I usually do that on my essay, I always put questions on it so people are like oh yeah maybe.

SB I think it comes down to what the essay is trying to do. If the essay is proving that you know lots of stuff then maybe a longer essay is useful. But if the essay is actually intended just to get people to think and to question their values and to question them, then maybe the short one could do that because it doesn't answer the question for them, it asks the reader to answer the question, do you agree or not?

Response You're right because sometimes just have a question and you're like oh my God and sometimes you read the long text and you don't feel anything.

- RQ1 > RQ3

This demonstrates that the short essay might prove to be useful, even for initially reluctant students such as this: it can be seen to have benefits and these need to be understood and implemented intelligently, rather than suggesting that the student might be at fault for not understanding. This is especially pertinent if the student is to have a hand in shaping the assignment, and thus taking some responsibility for the outcome.

SB So you could have done that then?

Response Yeah maybe.

SB That's interesting so for you definitely, then.

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SB Thank you for doing this and to say that I have all the ethical clearances to interview you. I don't use anyone's name in the PhD and I'm not going to use you as a comparison to anyone else except in the sense to say one student did something using text speak and another student did something and another student did that but I don't say, I might say and this one got such and such a grade but I don't make any comparisons which would identify you. You're welcome to read what I've written. This is very different to the first one you did and it's very different presumably to other essays you've done and I've got your feedback on the questionnaire. Just tell me a little bit about this, first of all were you happy to get a short essay and how did you respond to the problems in the brief?

Response I was happy because it was nothing like I'd ever done before, all the essays I've done in the past were like 1,000, 3,000 words and just really long and this time it was really different and quite difficult for me to do that and make so many points in such a short amount of time.

- RQ2

Happy, but challenged and frustrated.

SB To start with you did something very different didn't you?

Response Yeah I started with just like actual words, four words and sentences but I found that didn't really convey the points that I wanted to get across and it didn't convey as many points and then I kind of resorted to text speak because I found that it linked to the contents of the essay because I was talking about complicated logos and simple logos and how complicated logos are kind of less recognisable and so I used less recognisable words and conventional structures.

- RQ1 Short story and form.

This connects to much of the literature review's discussion of the short story in relation to specific forms such as poetry, and with the discussion about delimiting the short story in interesting and meaningful ways (2.5.2). This is especially pertinent and needs to be exploited in a technological and intellectual climate which nurtures innovative methods of producing, connecting and distributing texts, and tolerates diversity (both of reception and dissemination).

SB You don't normally like writing?

Response I like writing essays yeah but I didn't like breaking out of the whole conventional structure but I'm glad I did it.

SB Would you rather have done a thousand word one to start with?

Response Yeah because it would have been easier it think.

- RQ2 Challenge.

The literature review discusses the value of traditional academic writing (in the form of dissertations, for example) as something to provide students and visual artists with authority and credibility, both in their own eyes and the eyes of others (2.2.2). It is also something with which students are familiar, and my own research (in a Coventry University Foundation Studies questionnaire that I devised and handed out in November 2011) shows that visual arts students – at this level, certainly – are largely unsure about whether they would embrace creative writing: 41% said 'yes', 47% said 'maybe' and 12% said 'no'. This may well be because they are afraid of the prospect and / or feel it to be the province of literature / language / writing students. The reasons were not pursued. It may equally be because they are not truly sure what 'creative' really could be, and / or

because they value traditional writing as a metric of intellectual respectability (cf. literature review, 2.2.3). This also connects with Tonfoni (literature review, (2.2.5), whose aproach might lead students merely to redesign their writing instead of thinking carefully about its content and effect – this latter to be considered broadly.

SB More familiar?

Response Yeah more familiar. But I'm glad I did this one because it's like pushing the boundaries and creatively I can, I've broken out of that kind of little box that I was in.

SB So this essay prompted you to try things which you've not tried before?

Response Yeah.

SB So do you think this essay was in a way more risky to what you've done before in an essay?

Response Yeah but like if it was like, if it meant so much more like my final piece in an English degree or something then it would have been really risky.

SB Yeah I was going to say, if you got a 1000 word essay would you have done it all in text speak?

Response No, I'd be too scared actually but well before I did this.

SB Why? Because the 1000 word essay you feel has certain expectations?

Response Yeah 1000 words you can actually fit in all your points and full words and it's conventional and like an essay should be.

- RQ1 > RQ2 > RQ3 The size of the short story > challenge / risk.

The literature review (and again, above in these interviews) discusses the delimitation of the short story in relation to meaning and risk, if risk is seen as (embracing) the possibility of not getting one's meaning across (2.5.2). One might argue that there is no such thing as a short story, only shorter stories; that the idea of a short story is best thought of in comparative terms. This student cannot be sure that 1,000 words would enable all points to be fitted in, and we see here the security of tradition, and the sometimes extraordinary suspension of autonomous thinking which tradition, coupled with experience, can bring. Tradition is not all negative, but it needs to be understood and kept in check where appropriate.

SB In quote marks?

Response Yeah.

SB So did this format then did you feel that you could in a sense take a risk and it was okay, it was acceptable because it was a bizarre, short, unexpected, unusual kind of format?

Response Yeah I felt that I could do anything I wanted to get my points across.

- RQ2 Challenge.

The essay sanctioned breaking out.

SB Okay but why can't we do that in normal writing, do anything we want to get our points across?

Response Well I suppose we can, it's just kind of unheard of and just against what's expected.

SB Do you think that this essay has any kind of parallels in your own creative practice that you do anything to get a point across or did you see the essay as something separate in your creative practice?

Response I think now that I've done it, it's worked into my work as well, I can do things that are unconventional but it gets the point across really well because it's unconventional. I did some adverts and animations where I put images on each frame of the animation so when you play it through you can't actually see clearly what the images are but they just flick through it really, really quickly and that was my effort for my last project, obviously it's unconventional but it gets the point across because my point was I was showing images that people don't really want to see like poverty and all that but I was putting subliminal messages that kind of lasted for a few frames longer so you could actually see what they say and I think this essay helped.

SB That's good to hear. Did it help in the sense that you consciously looked back at it or do you think because I'm asking you now if you think it must have dripped into you subliminally?

Response Yes it just kind of dripped in because like the advert is breaking out of the boundary this broke out, this was like the first thing that made me break out of some kind of box.

- RQ1 > RQ2 > RQ3 Clear link between the essay and 'unconventional' practice.

SB And you were able then to think well actually hold on a minute breaking out of a box is what we should be doing?

Response Yeah.

- RQ2 > RQ3 Clear link between risky 'breaking out of a box' and creative practice. As we have seen in the literature review, nobody would dispute this, in all likelihood: the question is 'what might "breaking out of a box" entail, and would that be recognised by others (2.3)?

SB So this thing in a sense you could argue it represents creative practice?

Response Yes.

SB We shouldn't be working to formats otherwise what's a fine art student here.

Response Exactly.

SB You did very well and you did well in your presentation as well. Overall you got 90 on that so you did very well on that. When you did your presentation which was a week or so after the essay did you think when I do the presentation I could take a risk in the same way I did with the essay or did you see those as separate at the time?

Response At the time I thought it was separate, the brief was pictures.

SB It was eight pictures, no words.

Response Yeah I thought that was breaking out of a boundary in itself so I just did what I had to do really.

- RQ2 > RQ3 A very important point, picked up in the literature review: there is a danger that if a project is couched in risky, *outré* terms then the work that is done to fulfil that brief is not considered risky but par for the course; as pointed out in the literature review, this is a paradox which is a natural extension of logical thinking as well. Like a double negative cancelling itself out, so does a risky answer to a risky brief: it just becomes safe (2.3.2).

SB That was an unexpected kind of format. When you wrote this, if I'd been critical of this essay would you have been upset or do you think you'd have said well it's just an essay that is different, what does it matter?

Response It would depend what critique you'd give but when I submitted it I didn't think it was very good, because I used text speak and I didn't really like text speak.

SB But you don't have to like text speak to make a good essay do you?

Response Yeah but this happened just through frustration and just wanting to get it done but it ended up really good.

SB I don't like text speak, and like you I don't like text speak in a formal essay but this is different so it's going to be the right thing for the right place I suppose in a way, you could argue. On the other hand you could say I suppose that in a very formal essay if you started to use text speak occasionally it would stand out more. There's all sorts of different ways of looking at it. It has got great big gaps in here and I remember saying that you need to do it without any gaps but in a way it's almost like you're throwing the brief back at me, saying okay bring it on.

Response Yeah that's kind of what I did because you wanted it to fit in a box.

SB It does in a way.

Response Yeah and because I was using unconventional structures I thought why not, why can't I just add big spaces?

SB So the very fact that it was in an unconventional zone, it licenses you to try things out, would that be right?

Response Yes.

SB That's good to know. Did you make the point, as many points in there as you would have done in the longer essay do you think?

Response I would have probably made more in the longer essay but just a few more. In the longer essay it would have dragged on and I would have talked more in detail.

SB But do you think your argument in this essay has been as convincing as you could have made it in the longer one?

Response Yes I think it did get the point across, like in the few times I explained why I've used this text speak and then that sets it off for the rest of the essay.

- RQ1 As with the short story, one uses whatever works to get one's points across.

SB So is the essay then, if we're thinking about the essay generally not just this one, but essays generally then ...is to persuade somebody of a viewpoint or something like that?

Response Yeah, to persuade whoever is reading it that there can be complicated logos as well as simple ones.

SB It doesn't matter how long the essay is as long as people go away and think about it?

Response Yes.

SB I was going to ask you who's your reader? When you wrote this, if you write a thousand word essay, I suppose you thought that I would be reading it, an academic member of staff, tutors would be reading it.

Response Yes.

SB So who is your reader when you wrote this one?

Response It was you.

SB It was me as well?

Response I thought it kind of appeals to people who use text language so like even a teacher who would think my apps were a proper essay, it kind of meant things to you that you don't really need a proper structure.

- RQ1 Implied reader (literature review, 2.4.2).

SB But if you get the point across then it is a proper essay.

Response I mean proper in quotation marks.

SB This is what I'm getting at, this is the meat of this whole question. Actually it's a question of what we think of as a proper piece of work. Is a proper piece of work one which conforms to certain protocols and traditions or is a proper piece of work one which actually does what it's supposed to do, irrespective of how it does it?

Response Yeah.

- RQ3 Provisional meaning and practice aims overlap.

SB So in a sense you could say that that in some ways is proper otherwise it's not proper but in some ways

Response Yeah it gets the point across.

SB Do you think of yourself as a writer?

Response Well I want to get into writing, at the moment I'm kind of thinking of ideas of my own story and like a graphic novel that I could draw for and write but I need more practice in writing it.

SB Well you certainly got used to writing within boxes. Are you proud of that essay?

Response I am proud of it yes.

SB Why?

Response Because like I said I just broke out of the box and it just made me more creative, to see my work.

- RQ2 Risk as self-respect (autonomy) and not conforming to others' ideals; this could connect to the discussion in the literature review about the Stuckists and the Chapman Brothers (2.3.3): risk and the avant-garde should not be measured by practice-based absolutes because an avant-garde art movement can be a security blanket for many practitioners, a reassuring group who all agree and thus conform.

SB Is there anything you want to ask?

Response Not really.

SB Thank you very much and I appreciate you doing the interview for me and I appreciate you doing that as well because you did it as a kind of extra. It wasn't part of your syllabus but if it's been helpful to you then it's worth doing. Have you had your interview yet for the course?

Response Yeah.

SB I was going to say you can take this kind of thing and show it.

Response Yeah I took that to my interview because they asked for essays.

SB What did they say about that?

Response I kind of explained to them how it was breaking out of convention, I took a traditional essay that I did as well and they saw the difference.

SB What did they say about that one, raise an eyebrow?

Response I think they liked it actually, breaking out of what I thought writing would be.

- **RQ2** The risk was appreciated!.

SB Okay thank you so much.

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SB The first thing to say is to thank you for doing it and to say I have all the ethical clearances to do this. I won't mention you by name in the PhD. I'm not going to say they all did quite well apart from [REDACTED] or anything like that. I may well make comparisons and say this person's essay was very conventional and this person's was very different but no-one's name is mentioned. So nothing like that and you're always welcome to see what I've written anyway. You've done the shorter version. Evidently it's different to essays you've done before. First of all, tell me a bit about it. Did you enjoy doing it, did you find the restrictions irritating, did you find it a pleasure to try to do or what?

Response Yeah I did enjoy it, it was a challenge. I enjoyed the challenge. Part of me thinks that maybe the 1000 one would have been easier because I could have said everything I wanted to say. It was quite hard to fit in everything I wanted to say into 128 words.

- **RQ2** As many students did, this one also enjoyed the challenge.

SB It was. You sent me a couple of versions didn't you?

Response Yeah and you gave me feedback but yeah I liked it, it was good.

SB What did you like about it, if you couldn't say what you wanted to say, why did you like it?

Response The challenge and the techniques that you showed us and how to shorten things. It's very different to all the other essays I've done so I enjoyed it.

- **RQ3** The feedback regime was appreciated. A caveat: it does *not* take proportionately less time to evaluate a 128-word essay than a 1,000-word essay.

SB Do you think of yourself as a writer now, somebody who can write?

Response Probably not. I'm probably improving as I go along.

- **RQ2** A certain autonomy is emerging as well.

SB Did you think of yourself before you conformed to certain traditions and rules but this one didn't have any?

Response Not really no.

SB So you could break out. But you said you enjoyed the challenge?

Response Yeah it was good.

SB Are you proud of what you did?

Response Yeah I liked it, I was quite pleased with it really, I'm not very good at essays.

- **RQ2** Confidence from challenge; see point immediately above, as well.

SB How did you deal with the frustrations of it, it's too short for you, you couldn't make all the points you wanted to make? You've got all this knowledge about logos because you're going to go into the graphics world and suddenly you can't say it all.

Response I know. Well I listened to your feedback, it worked for me and shortened words or changed things around and I still don't think that I managed to fit everything in there but I think I got my point across.

- **RQ1** The provisional meaning of the short story: this student felt that the point was made even though not everything was fitted in. See also the literature review in connection with reader-response and Harkin's point that it is second-nature by now (2.4.2), and not even mentioned any more: this student did not mention it but has pretty well described it in action.

SB The main points across.

Response Yeah

SB If you wrote a thousand words would you be able to say everything you wanted to say as well?

Response I think so yeah. I think it would be easier.

SB Right, it's a thing that you can make your eight or 10 points and get on with it.

Response Yeah I would have been able to explain more what I mean as well without actually having to get straight to the point.

SB Why do you have to explain the points do you think?

Response I don't know.

SB Why can't you just make the point, let the readers get on with it?

Response Yeah that's very true.

SB Don't do everything for them. I'm just wondering if you think it's legitimate to actually say come on, it's a bit like in a lecture, give you so much information, you think about, go off and do some research or whatever or discuss it and so kind of communicating or expressing something or explaining something it becomes a kind of two way process whereby you say a certain amount and your reader goes, oh didn't know that before. I'm just wondering if there's a parallel here between this and your graphics work. I call it graphics generally but you know what I mean, your IG work, Illustration Graphics work whereby instead of laying everything down the line and saying this is how it's got to be. What you do is you kind of explain a little bit and you kind of think I don't know it's intriguing, arouses people's curiosity or something like that.

Response Yeah that's true. I didn't think of it like that really.

- **RQ1** See point immediately above.

SB I'm not putting words in your mouth here but I guess that's what happens if you have something which you can't say it all and it gets frustrating.

Response Mm.

SB Did you feel when you were doing this that you could kind of break rules a little bit?

Response I'm not sure, I don't know, I don't think so.

SB Did you feel you had the same written rules then that a longer essay would have?

Response Yeah I guess so. It was just shorter than any other essay that I'd done so I didn't really yeah.

SB So it wasn't really different apart from it just being shorter?

Response Yeah I guess so. I haven't really done an essay asking my opinion of something. I was looking forward to this one because I felt quite strongly on the subject. Yeah I enjoyed it because I knew exactly what I wanted to say.

- **RQ3** All essays ask for some kind of opinion: the degree of subjectivity and support of that opinion are debatable quantities within the essay format. This supports the earlier view (see blue texts, above) that the essay needs follow-up, and that writing support as it currently exists might be misguided even if well-intentioned.

SB So why didn't you do 1000 words then, if you know exactly what you want to say and can do it in 128.

Response I just thought I could get everything across in 1000.

SB Do you think that people will understand your point in that? You haven't explained it perhaps but do you think you could persuade people in 128 words?

Response Yeah I think so, I hope so.

- **RQ1 > RQ3** Persuasion does not need explanation: this needs to be clarified to these writers as well (if persuasion is the aim), because explanation can nullify and stultify because it becomes specific and thus can be criticised for whatever form it takes. This connects directly to much literature review discussion about the short story's reliance on form yet that very form deflecting criticism (2.5).

SB Have a look at things like manifestos, do you know *Adbusters* magazine? It's sort of culture-jamming anti-consumerism magazine from Canada and it's quite radical, it's been going for about 10 years, I think they've got copies in the library, you can certainly get it online but they have a manifesto, it says what it believes in and that's in about 150 words or something like that. They have to get it, we are culture jammers, we don't believe in this, we don't believe in that and all the rest of it and you read it and think wow, it's like a three minute song because you can say a lot in a three minute song. I'm wondering, I suppose in a sense I'm just speculating really whether or not you see there's some kind of parallel in a very graphic short essay and say a poster which can't do a lot of explanation but just kind of says buy this or whatever.

Response Yeah that's true.

- **RQ1 > RQ3** Suggestion in practice.

SB Perhaps I should have maybe explained it like that when I was doing it in terms of as a poster, do you think that would have been helpful?

Response Maybe.

- **RQ3** Pre- and post-essay process.

SB Or did you quite enjoy me just leaving you to do it in whatever way you wanted?

Response I don't know, I think how you put it was fine.

SB So it says here we like to have a challenge, take a risk therefore what's wrong with creating complex graphics but you don't feel that this essay you took a risk?

Response Probably not as much as I would have liked.

SB Do you think that you could have used bad grammar or something in it?

Response Bad grammar, I didn't think of doing that. I know that you said we could do whatever we want like text language.

- **RQ2, RQ3** See literature review and above: views on creativity and risk differ hugely and attempts at definition can be futile.

SB [redacted] did who was just here a minute ago, but interestingly enough he used a lot of text speak and ironically he also had huge gaps so he didn't actually in some places say any more because he had a lot of white space in his so if you've got those two together you can see that they both have quite different approaches, but does the approach really matter or is it in the end what matters is just whether we get the point across or not, I suppose that's the question. When you were writing it did you find it frustrating because you couldn't use certain words and you then had to use a different word?

Response Yeah. The whole thing with the box, you wanted it inside the box, that was really difficult. I didn't manage to get it perfect, that frustrated me quite a lot, I did have to change quite a few words around and it was difficult because I thought did this sound as good?

- **RQ1 > RQ3** Sound plays a part in this, because writers can use homophones and / or heterophones, although this is a sophisticated technique. Nevertheless, when space is short, this technique might be explored and will connect with visual arts practice through discussions about the economy of the mark. In the literature review, the discussion about vague language touched on this, although this extends that discussion (2.4.3).

SB So you found yourself kind of perfecting it, to make it fit?

Response Mm.

SB And because of that do you think the meaning got changed a little bit?

Response Yeah maybe.

SB Is that what you wanted to say?

Response Maybe a little yeah.

- **RQ1** Provisional meaning.

SB Okay and do you think that is a bad thing, in a sense the form, it's like the tail wagging the dog isn't it, suddenly you can't say what you want to say because the shape of the thing is getting in the way but is there a parallel with that like with saying posters or a graphic novel or a website or something like that where you've got a restriction? You're still working with restrictions aren't you? It's just another restriction isn't it?

Response Yeah.

SB In a sense a 1000-word essay just keeps going until you get to the end and stop but this one had restrictions. Did you find those restrictions stimulating or just irritating?

Response They're both probably. Yeah I don't know.

- **RQ1** Truly ambiguous response.

- **RQ3** A point for future implementation: students might get demotivated and will need careful rehabilitation, or a subsequent project that connects (as we saw with interviewee 07).

SB So you enjoyed it. You said what you wanted to say in it but you couldn't explain the points as much but you're not sure, let's get this right, but as I understand it you're not sure whether or not you should need to explain it all in that much detail or you think you should have done?

Response I thought I should have done but then what you said kind of made me change my mind.

SB Well I want it to be me that changes their mind but then I suppose the next question is, a thousand word essay you say more but then why not do a 5000-word essay, you can say even more then. Does there come a point where you sort of think actually why am I doing all this, why don't I just do it in 100 words and get on with it?

Response Yeah that's true yeah.

SB I suppose I'm suggesting that as an argument and seeing you can disagree but do you think that's possible that actually I've been saying to people some people have said oh no 1000 words don't want it and then some people 1000 words I could have said it all and I'm privately thinking what about 2000. If I'd given you a 1000- and a 2000-word essay I'd get all these people saying 1000 words can't say anything.

Response Yeah I suppose having it short like that it's more effective.

SB Do you think that there's some way of having it so short and having such an unusual thing like that, that actually then excuses it because you can say look at it, it's a box of words, how can you say everything in that so in a sense you can walk away from it without responsibility and say I did what I could.

Response Yeah.

- **RQ1** The importance of allowing writers to delimit (literature review, 2.5.2).

SB If I'd been very critical of the short essay, would you have been more upset than if you'd written the long one and I was critical of that? If I'd really been brutal about the short essay, you were saying I've never done one of these before or wouldn't it have made any difference?

Response I don't know. I don't think it would have made any difference, I'm not sure.

SB I suppose I'm just wondering when people are saying what I do is I'm not a writer so what I do is I concentrate on graphics illustrations so that's me, that's my heartbeat, that's what I do and this is something completely different. It's a bit like for me, if somebody said to me okay here's a violin go off and play the violin and I think I'll give it go, I'll play

something and they say oh it's tripe and I say well yeah, who cares, I don't know the violin so I don't mind you can be as critical as you like. It doesn't affect me but if somebody said that something I did which is close to my heart was complete rubbish I might sort of think that's a bit painful. I'm just wondering whether or not if this essay because it was a bit alien in a sense to everybody, if I'd been critical of this essay if you would have sort have said it doesn't matter, it's just a ridiculous project anyway, or would you still have felt it was you and personal to you?

Response So you're saying if you're critical about what I wrote would it have,

SB Would it have upset you as much as if you'd written the normal standard essay and I was critical of that?

Response I don't think so. I'm not sure.

SB Yeah it's impossible to tell because it hasn't happened. I'm just wondering whether or not you feel that it's such a strange and different thing, do you feel as though it's now, you can take ownership of that essay and say well actually I care about this essay as much as any other piece of work I do. You can?

Response Yeah.

- RQ3 Treat this as studio work.

SB Do you think of yourself as a writer now?

Response No not really. Yeah I wouldn't say I'm the best person at writing or anything like that. I think I did quite well with it.

SB You did yeah, you did alright.

Response I did okay.

SB Yeah you did, you got a good grade for it overall. You just didn't get very much in the invention side of it but you did very well in your presentation and I suppose part of me is wondering whether or not anything that you did on this essay informed your presentation or not or did you just see the essay and the presentation as two completely separate things?

Response I think this one was more separate, I'm not sure yeah.

SB I'm just wondering whether you thought at any point right I could have taken a risk on that?

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SB Firstly thank you for doing this and secondly to say that I have got all the correct ethical clearances to interview you and to use your information in an anonymous way. I'm not going to be drawing distinctions between students which in any way makes one student feel at a disadvantage somehow. It's not at all like that. What I might be saying is x number of students wrote a very conventional essay and they did this in their presentation. For example, you wrote a conventional essay but you did a very interesting presentation so I might be saying there were at least three students who did this. You're welcome to see what I've written anyway if you want to.

So you got this essay, 128 words and you were just randomly put into that group. What was your reaction when you got a 128 word essay.

Response At first I thought it was going to be easy. Then once I started to get bogged down and do the work I was like uh this is going to be hard. The thing was, don't get me wrong, I kind of liked it. I for one really don't like essays. I don't like writing.

SB You sent me the feedback.

Response Yeah. I don't like writing essays at all but this one was challenging but not in a hard way, it was fun. I guess when you read my feedback, the topic you chose was a car and I could relate to it and I really liked that. Back in school and what not it was all Shakespeare.

SB No Shakespeare. Do you remember I said to you guys, I'm not trying to turn you into literature students. I want you to think about the area that you're interested in.

Response I am a product designer, not automotive.

SB As near as possible.

Response Yeah exactly. I think it was that that really got me into it and picking words it was hard. I'm not very strong academically, vocabulary and all that, it's not my strong point.

- **RQ2** Some points need further clarification, but I did not want to get stuck on a particular point. However, I would have perhaps liked to know, in hindsight, what 'challenging but not in a hard way' might really mean.

SB Is that an academic thing, choosing words?

Response I would definitely say it was an academic thing, I think it is sort of, back in GCSE time I did children's English, I was not very up about it but I kind of did, I'd definitely say that so yeah choosing words was definitely, not exactly an issue but it was a tricky spot sort of thing.

SB Sure, but if this essay wasn't about Shakespeare any longer, it was about an area that you liked, then surely it's no longer that disconnected academic thing?

Response I think between the Shakespeare and the car thing, the interest point is that I have a lot more to say about it. with Shakespeare I have to, you've got to look back into it and this came more naturally. I didn't really have to think about it. I already knew what I wanted to say. So I think the difference is there, then I would pretty much write down what I want to say, go back into the whole 128 word thing, get it to fit, get exact number 128 and everything. We had to put it in a box so that was a bit tricky as well.

SB Did you enjoy that part of it?

Response Definitely because it was definitely an unusual essay. I've never done one before like that.

- **RQ3** The difference must keep on being celebrated: one must avoid absolutes if the freshness of the project is to be maintained (for all parties). This is touched on in the literature review when discussing risk and creativity (2.3.2).

SB So beforehand you would have thought of yourself not as a writer. Now you can say that you're a writer. You can write about cars.

Response Yes I would definitely say because writing before it was all Shakespeare. I wouldn't really talking about design, writing about it and stuff like that but once I'd done that, the 128 words it really hit me that it is, in my sketch book when I'm writing stuff using different words I could explain whatever it is I'm doing better, more clearly.

SB Because of doing this?

Response Yeah definitely.

- **RQ2 > RQ3** This study argues that sketchbooks should not be a repository for futile experiment if that experiment is going to claim to be risky: sketchbooks need to work and to be integrated into practice (literature review, 2.3.3).

SB So it made you think about the words you used. How did you do that? Did you just go online synonyms or...?

Response Yeah I mean it's really putting that basic word and changing it and using something else. For example I think I did one was important, I can't remember back in my essay, there were a few little words that you'd change, like minor I changed it for adjustment to make it longer.

SB To make it fit?

Response Mm yeah ... a bit more professional.

- **RQ3** This is a recurring theme: when projects like this are set, some unhelpful preconceptions will need to be unpicked. This should not be a simplistic, binary process, but one of arguing for a different ideal of professionalism rather than becoming antagonistic to existing norms and standards. The idea of professionalism is deep-rooted, and this study does not aim to uproot it but to grow others alongside it.

SB How did you find the alternative words? Did you go online?

Response Yeah I used the Thesaurus, I had that up. Thing is I don't think that doesn't really tell you what to write. You've still got to look up what you want to change the word to.

SB That kind of suggests to me that you've got a very clear idea of what it is that you want to say if you're finding that the word is quite the right word.

Response Yeah it is. I know what I want to say. It's in my head. It's sort of like my product design work actually, I know what I want to do, you've just got to show it to someone else in a better form sort of thing and I think that really helped.

SB But if you really know what you want to say, I suppose what I'm saying is if you were to do the 1000 word essay, the longer one, would you have been as clear about what you wanted to say?

Response I think it would be clear but in a sense it would be really plain sort of thing. It would be like you could just skim through it. Something that should have been done in five words it would be a whole sentence 12 words sort of thing.

SB Do you think that's a good model for practice then?

Response Definitely. I would say it takes a skill. It kind of builds up a skill of what you're writing and what not.

- **RQ3** See literature review 2.2.5 – visual arts writing should not mimic but be truly cognate.

SB And does that skill then, can you take that skill and apply it to product design?

Response Yes because we always annotate our work, not matter what, you have to annotate your work. What I mean by annotate is like what material you used and anything like that and you know that skill because we don't write an essay sort of thing, it's like two or three sentences so in a small because you want to show your drawing more, in smaller sections sort of thing so yeah in that way it kind of does help because obviously you don't want to take half a page writing what you want to say, you want more drawings and what not. You're not exactly limited to space but you kind of make yourself limited so having the 128 words that's the limitation there.

SB Sure, but I also mean in a bigger sense does working with limitations like this, is that also parallel to what you do product design because you've got limitations in product design.

Response Yeah exactly.

SB You've got limitations of material, cost, all these things and so were you able, did you at any point say when I did that essay I had to adjust it to fit, now I'm doing this product design I've got to adjust this to fit. Do they have connection or is that...

Response It is in a way because with product designs there's problems, there's constantly problems and as a problem designer you have to work around these problems, you've got to sort them out in a way that limitation is a problem you've got to sort it out, work round it sort of thing so there is that link with product design and obviously talking about what work it is, obviously that was a product design. I think they're probably the strongest link to it.

- **RQ2 . RQ3** Sketchbooks need to work to be effective: objectification can lead to ossification (literature review, 2.3.3).

SB You also said in the corridor that day that when you're writing a personal statement it made you consider which words to use.

Response Yeah exactly, I guess professionalism isn't exactly the right word. Because you obviously want to sell yourself.

SB Well it's pride isn't it and self-respect?

Response Exactly you just want to show that you can use these complicated words and you actually know what it means. Not just throwing out and catching off guard, so in that sense I'm not just using any random words. I actually know what they mean and why I'm using them sort of thing.

SB Your essay was just above average in that sense it was higher than average mark. There were some people who were more experimental with their wording. You weren't very experimental with your wording. Some people did it in text speak for example, that kind of thing. Was there a reason why you chose not to do that?

Response I think it's because at the end of the day it was an essay and I guess me not being flexible with essays I don't really change it up sort of thing, I just said what I wanted to say and get the point across so for me it was more, I guess it was an argument in a way that this is it sort of thing.

- **RQ1** Provisional meaning does not make you careless, it makes you more careful because you know how slippery meaning can be!

SB I say that because your presentation was excellent and one of the reasons I wanted to interview you was because your essay was sort of just above average 55/60, your presentation you're up in the 90s. What happened in between? Did you kind of use the essay feedback or did you treat the essay as something quite separate?

Response I think that comes down to personally, from like up there and I think that's the difference, my creativity to my academic strengths.

SB Sure but did you not think of this essay as being an opportunity to be creative or did you still think of it as being an opportunity to be academic?

Response I think it was more of an opportunity to be academic. I didn't really see it in a creative sense. I guess I never really have seen essays like that. I think for me it's more of how I feel, while growing up I was doing essays and we've never written an essay creatively. It's always had to be making proper grammar sense and everything.

- **RQ2** Risk will thrive in a traditionally risk-free environment: this point recurs often in these interviews and is covered in the literature review (2.3.2).

SB But this one gave you that chance not to do it.

Response It did, that's the thing as I said I've never done an essay like that.

SB Are you saying that perhaps you didn't quite feel as though you were allowed to take that risk?

Response Yeah sort of like that. I know you gave us the opportunity to but I just didn't personally feel right doing it like that because it was a written...

SB Too many years of having writing a certain way?

Response Yeah exactly sort of thing and with the presentation gave a lot more freedom because all you said was you just wanted images, that's how I gave it, that was my restriction in a way and images can be anything. I went bonkers with that.

- **RQ2 >RQ3** The significance and heritage of writing have deflected its risk onto something else, in this case the presentation following. This keys into literature review discussions about the authority of writing and its role in maintaining the credibility of visual arts courses, as well as into discussions about visual arts writing itself: what might this be? The answer, in this study, is one that improves practice and not one that looks like practice (2.2).

SB An image is up there, not what you put onto the projector. You could move your hands around and make some image.

Response Yeah using the tick and crosses, I kind of, once you said that worked, I just knew I had to do this. I really didn't give my partner the opportunity.

SB But you're making a point, absolutely making a point and here you're absolutely in the short essay you're persuading somebody of your point of view. There was a parallel.

Response Yeah I guess in my essay it's more argument sort of thing but I kind of see essays like that. When I think back of essays it's more religious education we have to argue why not for that.

SB I suppose in a sense you're like many of us, you're a victim of a system which has put the essay kind of up there.

Response Yes definitely.

SB It's not to be messed with.

Response It is like that because when you said you know change it up I was like you can't. I guess you can obviously but it just felt a bit weird and I guess I couldn't really push that forward that yeah you can be creative with your essay.

- **RQ2** See points above regarding context for risk.

SB Do you think if I'd said to you, you're doing the 1000 word essay be creative or you're doing the 128 word essay be creative, would you have felt the same degree of reluctance in both of them or do you think 128 word even though you didn't do very much do you think the 128 word allowed you a little bit more freedom.

Response I think with the 1000 words I can keep on going on about one thing in particular, but with the 128 words you have to move on. You don't have that freedom of keeping talking, babbling on about it so I think initially I think they'd both be the same but yeah I mean that's really it I think. The 1000 word one you keep on going. You have to go on for 1000 words.

SB I suppose it's the equivalent of saying to you right let's just go back to the cars thing again, most cars have got four wheels, forget about three wheelers for now but most have got four wheels and so if you design a weird car on a four wheeled body that's one thing. If you design a weird car and it's got five wheels, does that weirdness seem more acceptable because it's a strange car anyway. Do you see what I mean, the four wheeled car is the 1000 word essay, the five wheel car is the 128 word essay because it's just weird?

Response Yeah I guess it is but then you've got to see who's looking at the car and their tastes and what not because there's people out there that like weird cars sort of thing and you probably don't but someone else could.

SB Who's reading this essay then, the short one that you wrote, was that written for me or for friends or...?

Response In my opinion, in my head anyway when I was writing it I was thinking of Daniel he and me were kind of on opposite ends. We both had the same but two different things so in my mind it was more argumenting that, as right you are I think my points are more higher than yours.

- **RQ3** The implied reader and provisional meaning should be part of the discussions and the brief.

SB Interesting because there's symmetry here as well because he was the first person I saw today and you're the last person I'm seeing. Okay we haven't really, for you that essay in a sense you're sort of almost conditioned to see an essay in a particular way and this one gave you a little bit of freedom but not as much. Is that because you respect them for what they are and because you feel you're not a writer and it's somebody else's area or is it just because you feel you haven't got it out of your system yet?

Response I think it's a bit of both really because if I never have to write an essay again I'll be happy with that, honestly I won't miss it but yeah 128 words it was different and I think if I had more of those essays I think I would see essays in a whole different light.

- **RQ3** Writing connected to practice (but do not let the content be diminished).

SB But that thing of looking for the right word, like crafting something, isn't that the same as the crafting that you do with a product?

Response Yeah exactly. You change it.

SB You adjust it, you tune it, you make it

Response Let's say I wanted to design a phone, there's millions of phones out there right now. You want to make it something different so it stands out. Why do you want your phone to be better? You're sort of like that. You take the word and you just want to make it better so you know it seems more professional in a way. It feels that it could be up there you know what I mean.

SB Yeah. Did you think the shorter one then offered you that possibility?

Response Yes definitely because if it was a thousand words I think I would have just made, I would not change it into a higher more like if you take minor to change it to adjustment or something. I would have not made that. I would have just kept on going but 128 words you want to make it sound good because you're just limited on words, 128 words especially with the space as well, it's got to fit in a box.

- **RQ1** The short story's concentration on form and delimitation are vital (literature review, 2.5.2).

SB Do you think you could do that better than a literature student then because at least you understand shapes?

Response I don't really know.

SB Who's better placed to write 128 words, a designer or a writer?

Response I would say writer because of knowledge really.

SB Yeah but you're the guy who understands shape.

Response Fair point but the thing is they're the person that knows the words. I have to look it up. The writer, it's more natural in a sense because I think it's 100% on how you're seeing the work and the way you grow around it because I would say I hate essays because I never really liked them but then there might be someone else who always liked essays and they love to do an essay sort of thing but yeah I think it's more of a writer's thing than it is a designer's definitely. I'm not saying designers can't learn from it. I have, I know that for sure. So it is definitely a skill that everyone should have.

SB So can you sort of summarise what it is you said you've learned from it? What have you learnt from it?

Response Altering words to make it better whatever you're talking about to make it better, being more professional and also making it more clear in a sense. Some words they might mean the same thing but they're different. I can't remember because I've used the word definitely writing an essay. Sort of replication, it's like I could have used a different word totally, a more minor word that wouldn't stand out as much that sort of thing so definitely with my last project for example I really considered when I'm annotating, one point I was talking about materials and you know it felt when I read back, it wasn't like

it was my work sort of thing. It felt more mature, more grown up. In my eyes obviously if someone not seen it that person high in the standard sort of thing.

- RQ2 > RQ3 Risk and breaking traditions must be handled with great sensitivity. This student clearly cares about external standards, and there is no evidence to prove him wrong. Much of the benefit of this essay has been either subliminal or not discerned until applied elsewhere, and the best strategy may be simply to treat the essay as any other piece of writing but to make the conditions and demands of it so extreme that writers are forced to try things out, to break rules. The drafts would play a big part in this process, therefore.

SB Is there anything else you want to add to that?

Response One think I did say in the feedback as I said before I don't like essays but 128 words if you give another one I really don't mind doing it.

SB You would do it?

Response I would definitely.

SB Having said you would be happy to never see another essay.

Response Depends on the topic as well though, you said car, it's like that logo one for the graphics students I think I'd just blah-blah and get it done and over with but this was something you have to relate to and I enjoyed so I think that's where essays also come in, as in Shakespeare: I didn't really like it.

- RQ3 Autonomy will only come if students are given a chance to try it out: like much of this study, and much of life, the trick is making decisions but making it seem as if they were the other person's idea.

SB We need to think of something then like the idea of, okay you talked about the mobile phone as something you want to be desirable and all the rest of it. Can we write something where we compare a mobile phone, what is better? A mobile phone or Angelina Jolie? Can you make a comparison between a beautiful person and a beautiful telephone or would it be a comparison between a beautiful person and a beautiful painting or a beautiful ship or a beautiful day in the country or a lovely meal?

Response The really off the rest of the thing, a beautiful phone is a beautiful phone, Angelina Jolie that's a human, I can't really, you could get probably curves and put it on a phone.

SB I say it because when I was in publishing, I used to work for BBC and I remember doing a Spanish language book for the BBC and going to the briefing session and the guy who briefed me described a football match between Madrid and Barcelona and he said that's your brief. He just described the kind of theatricality of this match and the passion and this thing of 100,000 people. He said imagine this at night and the drums and the flares and the smoke and everything and he said that's your brief and I went away thinking right what he wants is something makes people kind of think wow.

Response I get what you mean. As a graphics designer or fine arts, fashion I could see a bit. I think something like that is possible because it's visionary, you see it. You could paint that sort of thing. In graphics you could come up with a logo that represents it but with product design it's a lot different. You can't really turn that into a product sort of thing.

SB I know you've got a lot of technology in a product to get round but a lot of the time when I was in publishing before I came here I used to do some stuff for *Vogue* and I've probably said this to you but they always used to criticise the work by saying it doesn't feel like *Vogue* and after a while they would say ah that's it, that feels like *Vogue* now. I wonder sometimes if you get a brief for a product which says it's got to be this, it's got to weigh this much, it's got to use this much battery power, it's got to be able to achieve xxx but it should also feel like a cool beer on a summer's evening and you think right how do I design a cool beer on a summer's evening. Do you see what I mean? That feeling of relaxation and it's cool.

Response When you say cool, metal comes into my head. If you said do this and make a phone cool I would probably use metal.

SB And you might make the metal smooth as opposed to

Response Yes it's actually coming to mind.

SB So the brief might suggest these kinds of things to you.

Response Definitely, all the briefs I've had haven't had nothing like that.

- RQ3 See point immediately above.

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SB I'm not going to quote you by name, I'm not going to identify you in the PhD or anything like that. I might use a line that you've said or something like that, it will be anonymised and also I've got all the ethical clearances to do the interviews and stuff like that. You're welcome to read what I say should you want to but really I'm interested in your experiences, I suppose you're the only one who did them both. Most people speculated about what the difference between the two is likely to be and had experience of doing longer essays before but you specifically did them both. Just tell me a little bit about the difference between them and how you reacted to those differences.

Response I preferred the longer essay, I really found it difficult the 128 words.

SB Because you found it difficult isn't that a challenge?

Response Yeah it was a challenge. I think I'm not quite sure if I rushed it a bit and if I'd had another day or two on it because I had ideas after I handed it to you about it which I think happens anyway but the longer essay I preferred because I found that challenging too. It's been a long time since I've had to write an essay and just keeping a focus on track.

- **RQ2** See literature review discussion about the nature of creativity, and in particular Koestler's idea that creativity involves reconciling the disparate (2.3.4). In this case, difficulty and challenge need bringing together.

SB You did pretty well. You got a very high grade for it and as you did in the presentation. You saw the feedback didn't you, you did very well in that.

Response Yeah I was pleased with it, definitely because I enjoyed it as well. I do like writing. But it was interesting to have that experience of both and I thought I would be more creative in the 128 word essay than I was. I did struggle with that one.

SB It may be because you didn't come to the seminars and tutorials because you would have had the different ones, so perhaps in a sense that's just the way it worked out, you perhaps didn't have those prompts and suggestions which some of the other students got which may have helped you to sort of, in a sense you were coming to it much colder than all the other ones were when we discussed ways they could get around the problem of not being able to say very much and technique and all that kind of stuff.

Response Yeah I got the gist of that from a few of the notes, they were all on the Moodle page as well as mine but I do think that would have helped a little more.

- **RQ2** See also the questionnaires: the short essay is not an easy option.

SB You thought, if I get this right, so you thought the 128 word essay could have had creative potential or had creative potential but you yourself didn't quite explore that potential, would that be right?

Response Yeah I think I had only done that one without having so much put into the longer essay I think I thought about it too much. I think I would have been able to have it condensed, that was my original plan to go into the 128 because I think I could have done that one first.

SB Did you try to condense the 1000 words into 128?

Response Yeah I thought about it too much I think.

SB You didn't think I'll start again from scratch?

Response No I found it too difficult to separate it. I thought of it and I did a little plan for it but I kept going back to my 1000 word one.

SB Did you say these are the main points in 1000 words, how do I say that in 128?

Response Yes almost. I tried to think of it in the way that you'd prompted me with using list words or text sort of thing and less formal that sort of thing. The grammar doesn't have to be as precise as it would have been.

- **RQ2** The power of convention: why does grammar not have to be as 'precise'? because it is an unusual format? But surely that is a subjective variable (like risk?). See literature review discussion regarding creativity and risk not being absolute but contextually dependent, like vague language (2.3.4).

SB Why is that? Do you think that you can get away with grammar irregularities?

¹ NB This is the student who did both versions of the essay (5.4.2)

Response I wasn't really too sure about that. I think that's where I missed out not being in the seminars for the 128 words. I didn't really grasp why it could be like that whereas 1000 word essay it's more thorough.

SB Do you think the 1000 word is more, again I don't want to ask a leading question but do you think 1000 word has more protocols and more conventions and traditions and therefore there's certain ways in which you write an essay, a bit like things at college?

Response Definitely it's more familiar to me. I don't know if it's as simple as that really if it is just familiarity and again it might be because I haven't written for such a long time.

SB Do you think if you had the unfamiliar format of the square and fitting it and few words and all the rest of it, does that, I suppose I'm asking you does that legitimise you to take more of a risk or to experiment more?

Response Yeah, that's the 128 words?

SB In the short one, could you take more of a risk in the short one do you think?

Response Yeah I believe so but I think it's not necessarily true. I think that's how I thought of it and I'm not sure I managed that very well.

SB That may or may not be. I'm just interested in do you think in the 1000 word essay you would instinctively, not so much play safe but play by the rules, whereas in the shorter essay you had more, it was kind of soft text stuff, that you were freer to try things out, would that be right?

Response Yeah absolutely.

- RQ2 Good: a more textured and intelligent response.

SB And is that then because it was a non-familiar shape and format?

Response Yeah I've never come across that before and I think it was more because you have to put across the points and still have a relevance to the brief in such small spacing I think it can be more creative and more artistic with how you write it and how you think about it as well.

SB It comes down I suppose to resourcefulness. You've got to in a sense that old cliché necessity is the mother of invention and all of that. If you're backed against the wall and you've actually got to do something desperate you've got to think of some sort of desperate solution. I'm just wondering whether or not you equate the sort of constraints and the difficulties of fitting it into that sort of format with imaginative and risky solutions?

Response Yeah I would agree with that because I generally find working under pressure a lot, I think I produce more maybe not better but I work, I feel like I work better under pressure and under that circumstance when it's a new format.

SB It's a different sort of pressure isn't it but it's still pressure.

Response Yeah definite type of pressure being limited in such a way I think you have to be like you said resourceful in new and possibly more creative. I don't know if that's the right word or not.

- RQ2 See reference to Koestler and creativity, above, and in literature review (2.3.4).

SB It will do. I understand what you mean. In a sense I suppose that's what creativity is. You really only measure it when you're up against it. If you didn't have to I suppose that's a way of looking at creativity isn't it, when you're forced into a corner you do something imaginative that you wouldn't normally, if you had to get from A to B you just get there wouldn't you? If you didn't have any shoes you'd think about different ways of getting there. Do you know what I mean, it's that sort of thing? What area, are you fine arts?

Response Fine arts.

SB Are you staying here or are you heading off?

Response Hopefully going elsewhere. I've got interviews next week.

SB Where are you going?

Response Bristol and Chelsea.

SB Take this thing with you. Show them that you can write, it's worth doing and show them that you did both and just explain what you've been saying to me, it's an important thing to do because they like to see that people can write, it's very

important and also they like to see that the sorts of things you've been saying to me about how you use your imagination and how you use your creative enterprise to get out of a hole, it's very important. Okay so we've established that then. You found the restrictions potentially are quite kind of liberating, would that be right?

Response Yeah they are liberating. But also, they were liberating and it was enjoyable actually. I found the 128-word essay a much more enjoyable process but I think it was because I'd had, it was almost like it was the other way round. The 1000-word essay I would have had a little plan almost of 128 words of how I would write it out, what I was going to include and my aim but it seems like I did it the other way round, having done both. The 1000 word essay was there as my basis, as the foundation and then I could sort of play off that one. There were different ways to think of it through and to even use a few sentences or a sentence of each paragraph as a basis of the 128 words. So it did sort of free how I was going to plan it out rather than having to think of it very traditionally. ...untraditional, I'm not sure how to word it really but it's that sort of feeling that you're allowed to be a bit more risky when it's an unconventional brief. I'm not sure, with writing I think of it differently I suppose, I'm not sure.

- **RQ1** See literature review discussion of the short story as compressed novel and not an empty vessel; also discussion above regarding six-word sagas and tweets (2.5.2, 2.5.4).

- **RQ2** Also the question of being 'risky' when the brief is 'unconventional' recurs: this has been mentioned before in this analysis and needs future attention.

SB You don't think of writing as being a creative expression?

Response It definitely is but in the sense that it's an essay following a brief to look at it because I did fine arts very traditional Andy Warhol and very popular and well known and I don't know why I thought of it differently to that. I'm not sure. I think I had a very traditional mindset going into the 1000-word essay and wanted to write the introduction and the middle and evaluate it and then with the 128 words it kind of turned it on its head and it did feel like it was well could get away with missing out that sort of structure as it was only and it was so specific as well. It was limited, you were still restricted which I feel restricted in the 1000-word essay because it has fit a certain format whereas 128 words doesn't and yet it's still restricting because it's got to be specific and it still has to get across the point.

SB In some ways I suppose you might argue, I don't know, but some people might argue that 1000 words was more restrictive in some ways because there's familiarity and there's expectation even though you can, you don't have to for example in the short one you might have to use a synonym which you didn't particularly want to use to make it fit that's a restriction but on the other hand as we were saying a minute ago in a sense you had more license for creative freedom because it's a weird essay in the first place. Do you see what I mean?

Response Definitely.

- **RQ1** This links to the point above and to other mentions of the short story's subversion: it is subversive because it works, and thus is a threat. Were it to be feeble, its attempts at subversion would be risible (see also literature review, 2.5.4).

SB It's a bit like that film *The Artist* which has just come out, the first time they made a silent movie for 80 years or something, you can get away with a lot because normally it's got sound in it, it's a similar kind of thing. Would that be a parallel do you think?

Response Yeah definitely.

SB Okay so on the one hand we could argue, we might argue that the longer essay had restrictions but a different type and this one had, the short essay had freedoms of a different type.

Response Definitely yeah.

- **RQ1 > RQ2** See point immediately above; also consider this: what is short? The student is comparing two essays and not two absolute sizes which make sense for their size, and this is a crucial distinction, both in this case and in discerning risk: both length and risk are only discernible as such if measured against anything else (see also literature review, 2.3.3).

SB How do we apply those to your creative practice? Do you see any link between writing this essay and what you do in the studio or did you see them as two quite separate things?

Response I think there's a link, probably in the sense that with having to, I've not really thought about it before. I think there is definitely a link because it is a creative process that you think about individually, that we all wrote very different essays I think and

SB Hugely different.

Response Yeah and we really make a lot of different work and so personally I think my process is very, I think I'm quite rigid in that sense. I like certain formats and I like to work a certain way, that is quite structured and I feel like the 1000 word essay had that balance of me even though that could, like I don't really have much imagination because the 128 word essay

is much freer and allows for more of that creative license that you mentioned but I'm not sure about the connection. I think, I don't really know

- **RQ3** One needs to be very careful about assuming links because they are articulated in an interview: the only real test is in the work and we have seen this in a few cases. However, this study is just the beginning, and can be built upon.

SB It's a difficult one.

Response Yeah working on the essays it was, it felt like a different process to me but maybe that was environment as well. I wasn't in a familiar place, I worked on computers so the process was different but in the way that I researched it.

SB This idea that could we say yeah this is a model for my own creative practice. I have something here which is free because it has no precedent, no expectation of what a 128-word essay should look like so I'm free in that sense but it's restricted in other ways because I can't use any word I want to use and I've got this very fixed shape and there must be a precedent like that. There must be an equivalent for that in your own fine art practice where you can say if I choose to do a portrait I'm not free because there's such a history of portraiture but to a certain extent all I'm doing is contributing to that tradition of portraiture. On the other hand, people have certain expectations of portraits so I can change that. You gain some, you lose some don't you, but I suppose it's an impossible question really. I'm just wondering whether or not at any point you kind of thought the essays were a bit like a piece of fine art or did you just think it was a piece of writing?

Response Yeah I thought of it separately, definitely I think. I enjoy writing and I think I have never had a link with it, through my art practice before so I think I just did keep it separate. I can see in hindsight how there is a link, there's definitely certain processes are similar. I think with now if I was to compare them I think the 1000 word essay probably reflected the past two or three months whereas now the 128 word essay would be reflective of the FMP [Final Major Project] that we're doing now, no brief, it's our brief, we have complete freedom with working under a certain pass, merit, distinction.

- **RQ3** The links might be obscure for some, and certainly are mentioned repeatedly here: I counsel against assuming this means they will be evident in future work. That is the function of the future work, crucially, otherwise the essay becomes self-referential, a criticism I have levelled at other modes of visual arts writing.

SB That's not so free is it?

Response Still restrictive like we have to follow that.

SB Certain protocols and things.

Response Yeah the freedom is there completely so I think it's actually reflects the whole few months of being here, I can see that.

SB Do you think it would have been helpful if having written the 128 one if I'd sat down with you all say one by one and just sort of gone through it and asked you to articulate how you had been different and what that essay had meant to you and why you'd done it in the way you'd done it and why you'd used certain words in certain places, do you think that might have helped you to apply that to, in other words getting to explain in the essay why have you done it like this. Do you think that might have helped you then to think next time you do a piece of practical work actually I can break these rules, I can take a risk, I can do that?

Response I would have found that yeah. I quite like evaluating how I work and why but I do think I need prompts in certain directions like that where I might understand how I work but if someone else is sort of saying or questioning why I'm doing it, it makes me think deeper into it to understand it better.

SB If I'd been really brutal on the feedback on the essay, on the 128 word essay, would that have upset you?

Response No.

- **RQ3** See point immediately above.

SB Someone who's really brutal to you on the feedback to your fine art practice, does that upset you?

Response No again because it's about objectivity and subjectivity I think.

SB I'm an external examiner at Cardiff and I went down there recently and talked to their third year students and an external examiner has to go in and check the systems are working and you talk to the students. I was talking to the students and they had said they had asked for brutal feedback. They said don't pull any punches, just tell us exactly so it was a real sort of one of those sessions where people say let's be frank with each other about what we think about each other and you come out of it thinking well that was quite painful but I feel better for it and they said they really enjoyed that.

Response I think it's necessary. I prefer that in a critical way. I think it's important because to learn and to be improving on what's already there.

SB I agree. But you're tougher in some ways than some other students, well not tougher but more robust, perhaps you can understand what the criticism is trying to do whereas many students take it quite personally and they get very upset if you trash their work. They can't see that you might be doing it to get to the next stage and sometimes it's difficult because I remember reading once that criticism was a compliment, otherwise quite nice, you know.

Response Yeah I think that's how I see it because the very sort of is not having any effect on someone. I would rather there'd be a bad effect than no effect at all and it does hurt. I think it's good in particular but a lot of the time I do carry self-doubt with the majority of work that I make.

- **RQ3** See point immediately above.

SB I think everyone does.

Response Exactly, I think everyone does and that is the way that you respond to it is different but I appreciated the truth and brutal.

SB You could argue couldn't you that if the criticism is brutal they misunderstood it.

Response Yeah that's true. It depends on what the criticism is.

SB Coming back to the short essay, if you couldn't say everything you wanted to say, if it's an unfamiliar format, if it's a bit of exploration, in a sense none of those things are things which, if someone was very brutally critical of that you could say well I just tried something new. It's a bit like saying I'll just try driving a truck or a train for the first time and unless somebody says you drove it terribly you could say fair enough, I understand that. Do you think therefore that I could have been very, very brutal in the 128-word essay and that might not have been as painful as it would have been if I'd been brutal about something wrong with it?

Response Yeah possibly because it is new, but then I have very high expectations of myself and I would have taken it personally but still appreciate it and I still would prefer if that's the way it's been read and you think there could have been a lot more or a different way to my approach, that is fair enough.

SB Because it was unfamiliar, if you could distance yourself from it, say it's less personal. It's just this weird thing I've been asked to do.

Response Yeah I do think I probably would still have been, I just think I have to be good at everything.

SB Very high standards.

Response Yeah I do have quite high expectations.

SB I think there's a whole different language of criticism now though in art schools because people have to be so careful, we have to, what we say to students and things like that and how we say it but I can remember at school studying art and doing essays when I studied English literature and the things that were said to us would not be accepted here the way it was said and you absolutely think your essay was torn up. I had stuff torn up. They wouldn't swear but they'd nearly as far as that. So I suppose we're in a different, I'm just wondering, it just completely struck me now talking to you. The first person all day that's come up with the possibility that maybe criticism of the essay could be much harsher in a way because people might not feel as they owned the essay in quite the same way that they felt they owned their own practice.

Response Yeah.

SB Because it's such an unusual format?

Response Yeah definitely.

- **RQ1 > RQ3** This is an important point, because the very riskiness and difference, its radicalism, might make students not take the project seriously. This is another reason why it might benefit from some sort of practical component to make sense of it – as has been stressed throughout, this study seeks to connect writing as opposed to leaving it as a discrete entity. On the other hand, risks might be taken with the essay and not with any subsequent work: the handling of the work – the seminars, the feedbacks – are important in this respect. It is important to be realistic about claims; nevertheless, there is evidence that the writing affected the projects in a positive way.

SB Would you say that's a possibility then?

Response Yeah for me.

SB Still cry a bit inside but not as much!

Response Yeah!

SB Might you then have applied if I had been very brutal on the essay brutal might you also then have taken a look back at other work and thought maybe I'm not doing too well here either?

Response Yeah, at the time I think I had, when I was finishing off the project. Again they were separate but I think it had an influence on part of that project and how I finished that.

- **RQ3** See point immediately above.

SB Sure.

Response I can't really remember it.

SB That's interesting. That's really good. Is there anything else you want to add about the short essay?

Response No I don't think so.

SB Do you want another one?

Response No thank you!

SB It's asking a lot, it's difficult to do and I appreciate you doing two.

Response I enjoyed it and I'm glad I did the two.

SB And you did very well. I gave you the grade on the first one you did and you did very well and you did well in your presentation. Good for you. Thanks for doing this.

Appendix 4

All 128-word essays

This contains the entire submission of 128-word essays, arranged in alphabetical order of student surname (but anonymised), and without commentary. For commentary, see the analysis of 12 selected examples in Chapter 4.

Few of the writers managed to keep to the strictly formal requirements of the square essay: some changed the font, some did not manage to keep to 16 lines; some had strange alignments, unruly internal spaces and interesting use of word spaces. The reason for choosing Microsoft Word was its reliability and ubiquity. Because the files were in Microsoft Word, there should have been no changes when sending the essays through to me: the form of these essays is the form in which they appeared on my screen. There may have been straightforward computing reasons and / or very interesting and cogent intellectual reasons for any variations from the template requirements.

However, the scope of the study meant that it was not possible to interview all 35 writers at length, nor to find out if what they sent was what they intended, nor were internal cohort comparisons in the study's province.

The reasons for choice of interview candidates are set out in the appropriate part of Chapter 5.

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Appendix 5

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Appendix 6

Coventry Symposium

(Paper delivered at Coventry University, November 2010)

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Appendix 7

'Blah Blah Blahnik'

(Paper published by ICERI 2012 and accompanied by presentation)

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