

literacies

# Student Writing

Access, Regulation, Desire

Theresa M. Lillis

good, what, stereotypes, despite male assertions, to the contrary, and what is plagiarism? el may have a direct effect on exclusion, any essay argues, sign and may by choice or apathy in discussing the problems, routines, will CRITICALLY EVALUATE does personal experience count? my and when I will introduce factors in cultural attitudes, institutional

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## STUDENT WRITING

*Student Writing* presents an accessible and thought-provoking study of academic writing practices. Informed by 'composition' research from the US and 'academic literacies studies' from the UK, the book challenges current official discourse on writing as a 'skill'. Lillis argues for an approach which sees student academic writing as 'social practice'.

The book draws extensively on a three-year study with ten 'non-traditional' students in higher education and their experience of academic writing. Using case study material – including literacy history interviews, extended discussions with students about their writing of discipline-specific essays, and extracts from essays – Lillis explores the following three issues surrounding individual student writing.

- **Access** to higher education and to its language and literacy representational resources
- **Regulation** of meaning-making in academic writing
- **Desire** for participation in higher education and for choices over ways of meaning in academic writing

*Student Writing* raises questions about why academics write as they do, who benefits from such writing, which meanings are valued and how, on what terms 'outsiders' get to be 'insiders' and at what costs.

**Theresa M. Lillis** is Lecturer in Language and Education at the Centre for Language and Communications at the Open University.

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Access, Regulation, Desire  
*Theresa M. Lillis*

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*Theresa M. Lillis*



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## PREFACE

### Why write this book?

As somebody from a working-class background and a member of the first generation in my family to go to university, I experienced a range of contradictory emotions in my steps towards, and later my participation in, higher education. In the institutional spaces leading to entry in higher education – studying at school for state exams – and later sitting in seminars and lectures, I felt a strong sense of being an outsider, hating this ‘place’ as well as loving the possibility of learning that it promised to offer up. Language was often at the centre of these emotions, conscious as I was of not having the ‘right’ language to express myself in speech and in writing. Whilst fiercely proud of my own background – my family, my local working-class English community on the council estate, my wider Irish community – I knew that these were the ‘wrong background’ and that I risked publicising my membership of the wrong communities every time I opened my mouth. I had a strong fear of being ‘found out’, a fear that although I had passed the official tests of the time – state exams at 11, 16 and 18 – I wasn’t really good enough to be at university. At the same time I had a strong sense of the injustice of the power wielded by those who possessed what I would later come to call the ‘appropriate linguistic capital’, that is, the ways with words that the institution values. Later, as a tutor working with adults studying on undergraduate courses, I witnessed similar struggles, fears and hopes. I also became aware of how many of these tensions centred on academic writing as the students attempted to write within the rules of the game without knowing what the rules were. At the same time, students were often dissatisfied with the kinds of meaning making in which they felt they were expected to engage. This book is my attempt at making publicly visible what many, like myself, from backgrounds traditionally excluded from higher education, know intuitively at some level.

There are good reasons for thinking that such an attempt is timely. In recent years participation in higher education, in the UK as in many parts of the world, has grown significantly, now involving greater numbers of students from social backgrounds previously excluded. Within this reconfigured space, the experiences explored in this book are not peripheral but central

to the new project of higher education, raising questions not only about the nature of such participation but also about the nature of higher education, about what it is and does, and to what end. This book is therefore intended as a contribution to the much larger debate about what we want from higher education at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

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Y como siempre a Guillermo, Liam y Carmen. ‘A esta cita, sólo faltan las gaviotas’.

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# INTRODUCTION

## Focus and research background

### **What is this book about?**

This book is about student writing in higher education. It sets out to explore academic writing practices in higher education with particular reference to the experience of so-called ‘non-traditional’ students in the United Kingdom, that is, students from social groups who have historically been largely excluded from higher education. (A range of terms is used to refer to such students in different higher education contexts; for example, ‘educationally disadvantaged’ in South Africa, ‘disadvantaged minorities’ in North America.) The principal arguments in this book are as follows:

- 1 Current ways of thinking and talking about student writing in official discourse are limited, working against the more recent aim of widening access to students from social groups historically excluded.
- 2 Recent theory and research emerging from what can be broadly described as a *social practices* approach – within linguistics, composition and literacy studies – need to be brought into current discussions about written communication in higher education. This theory and research provides a powerful framework for defining the nature of institutional literacy practices as well as for our understanding about what may be at stake for individuals as they engage in these practices.
- 3 Students’ written academic texts and their accounts of the production of these texts need to be at the centre of any attempt to explore what’s involved in student academic writing.
- 4 Current pedagogic practice surrounding student writing needs to be critically reviewed; in particular, the dominant practice of tutor ‘feedback’ needs to be transformed by a more dialogic approach to students’ construction of meaning in written texts.

In making these arguments, I put the experience of student-writers centre stage. In doing so, I’m conscious of the danger of constructing an ‘other’, an ‘outsider’ who is somehow fundamentally different from those who are

already insiders, or who are most likely to become insiders, in higher education (henceforward HE). Constructed as already outside of academia, it's easy to represent any struggles students face as 'their' problem. But this is not an 'us' versus 'them' debate. A key argument in this book is that detailed attention to specific instances of students' writing helps to illuminate the nature of the writing practices within the academy and, consequently, to raise important questions for all of us who engage in them. So, whilst the focus of this book is the production of written texts by 'non-traditional' students, it is also a book about us, you and me, and all those who read and write academic texts. Why do we write as we do? Who gets to write in these ways? Who benefits from such writing? What meanings are we valuing and how? Who does the academy construct as belonging, and how? On what terms do 'outsiders' get to be 'insiders' and at what costs? How do we want to write, and why?

The tensions surrounding these questions – and possible answers to these questions – are explored across three key dimensions in this book, as indicated by the subtitle: *access* to HE and to its representational resources, that is, the language and literacy resources for meaning making that are available in higher education; *regulation* of meaning making in academic literacy practices; *desire* for participation in HE and for choices over meaning making.

#### *Connections . . .*

One way of attempting to break down the 'us' versus 'them' split is to recognize that I'm one of 'them'. This is not an autobiography – my story alone would not be important enough, I think. Where it is important, is in the way it connects with the lived experience of the student-writers who shared their views, their texts and their time with me. I make connections at different points in the book by bringing in some of my particular experiences, past and present, of being and writing in academia. In doing so, I'm attempting to avoid constructing an 'other', to emphasise that the reasons why we engage in academic endeavour are often (always?) connected implicitly to our own experiences and desires; to point to the constructed nature of knowledge making – there is a person writing this book with her own history and interests.

#### **Who is this book for?**

In writing this book, a key aim has been to bring together the ideas, concerns and positions from three broad, often quite distinct, communities in HE; these are student-writers, practitioners in HE (whether teachers or policy makers) and academic literacy researchers. These often exist as separate constituencies, failing to engage actively with each other's understandings

about student writing. My aim is to bring together these constituencies, both as the sources and the readers of this book, in an attempt to construct a framework we can share for thinking about students and their writing in HE.

If you're a student, particularly from a so-called 'non-traditional' background, I hope that you'll find this book useful at a personal level in validating, perhaps, some of your experiences – 'I've felt like that too' – and, more importantly, in making visible some of the ways in which institutional practices work. If you are a tutor with an interest in, or responsibilities relating to, student writing, I hope that you'll find the student-writers' perspectives useful to your practice, as well as to your theorising about what's involved in student writing in HE. The insights from the student-writers' experience challenge the official discourse on writing as a 'skill' and raise questions about current institutional practices. They thus provide a critique which can contribute to a wider debate about student writing and student writing pedagogy in HE.

If you are interested in teaching and learning in HE more generally, the close attention paid to specific instances of written texts, alongside the student-writers' perspectives, will illustrate the value of such analysis for documenting the 'student experience', a relatively recent interest in the UK context. If you are an educator and/or policy maker committed to widening participation in HE, this book should be of interest in that it links the problematics of access (to what? and by whom?) to questions about academic language and literacy practices in HE.

As well as being of relevance to those primarily concerned with teaching and learning in HE, this book will be of interest to those working in the growing field of literacy studies in the UK and in the research domain of student academic writing more specifically, in the following ways: by making available substantial case study material drawn from a specific group of students in higher education; by making connections between current work on student writing, particularly 'non-traditional' students and their writing, from two distinct contexts, the UK and the US; by foregrounding the relevance of a New Literacy Studies' perspective to researching student writing in HE; by exploring connections between the dominant literacy practice in HE, essayist literacy, and gender.

In thinking of all these potential readers, I have tried to write in ways which will not drive people away: I do use terminology which may be new to some readers but I have tried to explain such terms rather than take them for granted (or see them as your problem). In writing about academic writing I am acutely aware of the ways in which particular uses of language may serve to exclude, rather than include, particular readers. But I have also learnt enough to know that I cannot know how different readers will respond to, or 'read', me and this text. In writing this book, it has helped me to think of readers who will accept this book as an inevitably flawed, yet honest, attempt to contribute to an understanding about students and their writing in HE.



### **The research on which this book is based**

This book constitutes a critique of current official discourse on student writing. This critique is informed by socially oriented theory and research emerging from a number of disciplinary and geographical contexts, but is driven by my understandings generated from a research project spanning some four years. This project focuses on the experience of ten ‘non-traditional’ students as they engage in academic writing during their first years of undergraduate study in the UK. The value of such case study research is that it offers up the possibility of ‘thick description’ (Geertz 1973) which facilitates insights into the nature of the phenomena being explored: in this instance, detailed attention to specific instances of student writing tells us about individual student experiences, as well as about the nature of academic literacy practices in higher education.

Brief profiles, drawn from literacy history interviews and ongoing conversations of three of the student-writers, are provided on pages 5, 7 and 8 as a way of beginning to introduce the student-writers to you. Further profiles are offered throughout the course of this book, with brief overviews of the student-writers’ educational background in Appendix 1.

There are obvious differences between the three student-writers, Amira, Bridget and Siria, not least in terms of age, ethnicity and linguistic backgrounds. But their profiles also illustrate experiences that are common across all the students’ experiences: all of them have been through the compulsory schooling system in England, but their route towards higher education has not been smooth; none went from school to university at 18; most were unsuccessful at secondary school, and even those who were successful, in that they passed several GCSEs/O levels (national examinations at age 16), did not think of university as a realistic option; they all describe themselves as being from working-class backgrounds; seven of the ten student-writers are the first in their families to go to university; they have all worked in paid employment; all have had (and most continue to have) substantial family responsibilities to parents and/or children. Their pathways through higher education are not straightforward in that only three of the student-writers have managed to sustain continuous participation in higher education over a three/four-year period (see Chapter 5).

It is important to note that I don’t see the student-writers’ literacy/life-history accounts as ‘background information’, but rather as central to any attempt to understand their specific experiences of engaging in academic writing in HE. Thus, although throughout the book I refer to them as ‘student-writers’, it is important to recognise that, firstly, and like increasing numbers of participants in higher education, they are ‘students’ for only a part of their lives. They are also, not least, workers, mothers and daughters. Secondly, as ‘students’, they are not a homogeneous group: they are Black, white, working-class, bilingual, monolingual, Muslim. Language is central to

**Amira<sup>1</sup>**

Amira is a 21-year-old woman from a Yemeni background. She is married and has one young child. She was brought up in a bilingual household where Arabic and English were spoken on a daily basis and where much codeswitching between languages went on. She remembers from an early age being told stories both in Arabic and English. She feels equally comfortable when talking Arabic and English, but feels that she is more competent in reading and writing in English than in Arabic.

Amira went to a white monolingual primary school, which she loved, and where she remembers doing well, receiving many certificates for her success in different subject areas. She also attended Arabic classes for two years but feels she didn't learn much. Her mother taught her how to read and write in Arabic at home. She would like to improve her written Arabic but currently does not have the time.

Her success at school changed when she moved to the *posh* white secondary school.

At primary school they were always encouraging you. But at secondary, I don't think they were bothered. There were too many pupils anyway.

Although at third year (Y9 – aged 14) it was estimated that she was heading for good grades in all her GCSEs,<sup>2</sup> she passed only Maths and English.

I never used to go to school, I was a nut! I used to go to my friend's house which was up the road. And the teachers, I don't think they cared, because everybody was wagging it, so they never used to check. I mean, they knew I was never in a lesson. I think the school should have taken more care. At 15 or 16, you don't realise what you're doing. I think they should have rung my parents up. At least that would have made me go to school. But they didn't do anything.

On leaving school she *just passed* her BTEC in social work; she was still spending a lot of time *messing about*. She then got married in Yemen where she planned to live but, due to illness, returned to England. She decided to return to formal education and, on advice from the community centre where she then worked, joined a level 1 higher education course in Language Studies. However, Amira was unclear as to where such a course might lead her.

Amira expressed concern about having to write *more academic English*, which she felt was at a *higher level* than the English she would normally use. In her first year in higher education, she said she was trying to deal with this by looking for more formal words from the course books she was reading, as well as using a thesaurus and a dictionary.

the many activities and corresponding identities that make up their daily lives, and concerns about the status of such language(s) in an academic context are often at the forefront of their minds as they engage in academic writing. So, for example, monolingual student-writers feel that the type of English language that they use is not good enough for academia, whilst some bilingual student-writers worry about what they feel to be the negative effect of being brought up bilingually in two 'non-standard' languages. The kinds of meanings that the student-writers make in their academic texts and their feelings about what they do/don't mean in their writing are bound up with ongoing aspects of their identities in the many dimensions of their lives, both inside and outside the world of academia.

This is an obvious but important lesson for academia to learn: that students bring a whole range of cultural and social experiences to their acts of meaning making in academic writing and, as I argue in this book, these need to be brought into our thinking about teaching and learning in HE.

Moreover, such life and language experiences are central to any exploration of meaning making in academic writing. I start from the premise that in order to understand what is involved in students' writing, it is important to have a sense of who the student-writers are and the representational resources they are potentially drawing on, that is, the language resources that they draw on for their meaning making (Kress 1996: 18; see Chapter 2). I am not suggesting that it is possible to link, in any straightforward way, all specific instances of meaning making in academic writing with aspects of a student-writer's life and habits of meaning. However, coming to know something of the student-writers' lives has been central to my understanding of their experiences of engaging in academic writing, as is evident in discussions in Chapters 4, 5 and 6.

The importance I attach to the student-writers' literacy/life histories, my stance as a participant-observer of their experience of engaging in academic writing alongside the collection and analysis of numerous kinds of texts related to their writing (course guidelines on essay questions, departmental feedback and advice sheets, tutors' written comments) locates this study within ethnographic approaches to language and literacy where the emphasis is on exploring literacy in real-world settings, through a range of methods (see for examples, Baynham 1995; Barton and Hamilton 1998; Ivanic 1998). However, the principal methodological tool used in this project was that of 'talk around texts', carried out over a period of between one and four years. Details of the data collection are provided in Appendix 3. Briefly, the student-writers and I met at regular intervals to discuss drafts of assignments they were writing for their courses of study, which included Language Studies, Law, Educational Studies and Women's Studies.

Given our, often, quite different interests for meeting to talk about texts, it was important to find ways of practically engaging in two principal types of

### Bridget

Bridget is a 47-year-old white woman from a working-class background. She lives with her husband and daughter who is 17 years old. Before beginning her BA course in Social Work Studies, she had successfully completed an Access course.

Bridget remembers little about her primary schooling except that her older brother encouraged her to read and write and, unlike their parents, thought highly of studying. Bridget unexpectedly failed the 11-plus examination<sup>3</sup> and, although initially disappointed, was pleased to be going to the brand new secondary modern school. She enjoyed English and was interested in learning in general. However, continuing education after 16 was never an option, and university was well out of sight:

It never came into it. For a start, my parents couldn't afford it. And also, girls just weren't pushed to go into university. And if you went to secondary modern it wasn't mentioned. *No* possibility at all.

On leaving school at 16 with three O levels, Bridget went to secretarial college for a year and then began work in a chartered accountant's office. She was pleased to get this *decent job*. After marrying, she and her husband ran a small business successfully. During this time she had a daughter and, as well as having the main responsibilities for house and children, she did the administrative work for the business. After twelve years, when her husband became ill, they abandoned the business. This left Bridget to make a decision about looking for paid work elsewhere. She decided to go to college. Although she had an idea about studying social work from the moment she thought of returning to study, she only considered this a realistic proposition towards the end of the Access course:

The time came to fill in these UCAS forms and I thought, what am I doing here? . . . And then I thought, well nothing to lose, why not?

To a large extent, university was still a distant place:

I think, because before university always seemed so far off, you always thought that the standard was way above your head and you could never get to that standard.

Although uncertain of her capabilities, Bridget, like others, talks of her desire for learning:

the more you do, the more you want to do.

Bridget felt that her writing in HE was not *academic enough* for higher education, even though tutors on the Access course had reassured the students that it would be acceptable to use language that they felt comfortable with:

They [tutors on the Access course] always said to us, 'Just try and use simple language. Don't try and use words you don't understand.' But I always thought that the way I wrote was not what they expected, not the academic standard.

### Siria

Siria is a Sylheti-Bengali and English speaker from a Bangladeshi family. She has lived in England since she was 2 years old.

From when Siria came to England, Sylheti was, and continued to be, the language of the home and her local community. Siria attended Bengali classes for three evenings a week from the age of 7–14 years, as well as learning Arabic for religious purposes.

Siria remembers doing a lot of reading and writing:

By the time I was 8, there was a vast amount of reading and writing going on. And I didn't really enjoy so much of it because there was so much time involved, reading and writing three languages. It was quite intense.

Whilst *doing quite well* at primary school, things changed for Siria in secondary school:

I'd say I didn't really enjoy school [secondary]. I used to hate going to secondary school. I think it was the atmosphere, I didn't think it was a nice atmosphere, whereas in primary school, I think the children . . . it was a lot more supportive. Whereas in secondary, it was cold, not very welcoming, the children used to be very sarcastic. They weren't exactly friendly. Because of all that, I never used to ask for extra help if I didn't understand anything. I just used to keep quiet, never put my hand up and say I don't understand, in case somebody said, 'oh dummy'.

She did not think of herself as being good at school, and certainly never thought of university as an option.

I always felt as if university was something well out of reach. But now I'm sort of thinking, well, things can't be too difficult! Okay, I haven't done so well in the past. That doesn't mean to say I can't do well in the future.

After leaving school, Siria began a BTEC course in social work. She did not complete the course because of plans for an arranged marriage, which she challenged and, after much stress, left home to start her life alone. Having taken this major decision in her life, she felt quite confident about pursuing her interests in education.

One of Siria's concerns about studying in HE was the problem she felt she faced in getting ideas down on paper:

I'd say, as a writer I can write quite well, but I think the only problem I'd tell you with my writing is sometimes I have a very good idea and I think, right, this is what I'm going to write about and I've already got it mapped in my head. But when I actually come to writing, I can never get the same phrase or the same definition of what I want to talk about. So the great idea that I have in my head turns out a mess on paper.

talk: talk to get on with the ‘business as usual’ (Ellsworth: 1994) of HE, that is, talk aimed at teaching and learning how to write in the ways required by the academy, and a key concern of the student-writers; and talk to engage in an exploration of the students’ experiences of engaging in academic writing practices. This first type of talking space, with the conventionally prescribed talking roles of student and teacher, was easy for us to occupy. The second type of space had to be more consciously constructed. For whilst I was not always the tutor-assessor at the times of our discussion about texts, that is the assessor of the writing assignments, with all the student-writers I have always been the ‘knowledgeable insider’ (Harris 1992: 379), that is, viewed by the student-writers as someone who knows more about the conventions that they are expected to write within than they do. As the powerful participant within this context, I attempted to move us away from the conventional teacher-dominated talking space. The most obvious way of doing this was to ask open questions in order to move away from my role as talker to that of listener. Examples of these questions are given below:

*Example 1<sup>4</sup>*

- T:* Do you think it’s harder for you than others. Do you think it’s hard for everybody?
- M:* I don’t know. Maybe other people will experience it as well, but, say, I don’t want to use anybody as an example, but say for instance, somebody in our class, like G—— can speak his first language very well, that’s the impression I’ve been given, so maybe he can speak English very well as well. He can write it very well, maybe, that’s the impression I get, I might be wrong. But because I can’t speak either language very well, I probably, that’s probably why I find it so difficult to write standard English. Because I’ve got like a mixture of dialects, haven’t I? The Yorkshire dialect and I’ve got no standard in a sense. So when I use standard English I find it very difficult to get ideas down properly. I know I can do it and if I hear something that’s ungrammatical in English, I can pick it out. But to produce it, get it down in a quick time, takes a very long time. It takes a long time, I have to think about it as well. At one time I used to have problems with the past and present tense. I didn’t see it as important because in Creole they don’t stress tense. So I used to have a problem when I wrote in English. I’d write *wasn’t* there and *is* in the middle of a paragraph when I was talking about the same subject when I should use the same tense all the way through. But I don’t have that problem so much now. I’ve conquered that. But it’s like each time I start a course or I do some kind of written work I conquer something . . .

*Example 2*

- T:* Do you think the English you use is different from academic English?
- K:* Definitely. Fancy words for a start, erm . . . very, I don't like using the word . . . I don't see why not. I tend to write from a personal point of view. I never see academic writing as personal. It's cold. That's how I feel.
- T:* Do you feel under pressure to make your writing cold?
- K:* I don't know, I haven't been here long enough [six weeks into the course].

Although the student-writers and I here are still occupying the conventional roles of teacher-as-questioner, student-as-respondent, the above questions/answers move us a little away from what I refer to as the institutional 'space for telling', in that there is some space for the student-writer to talk of her views and experiences. But what is more important about these questions and answers is that they are not one-off exchanges between us but, over time, become part of shared strands of meaning across our talk; in Maybin's terms, they are part of a 'long conversation' (1994).

In order to facilitate this more exploratory and extended type of talk, I made 'talkback', in contrast to 'feedback', notes, as an attempt to construct an agenda aimed at opening up discussion and at foregrounding the student-writer's interests and concerns. The differences between 'talkback' and 'feedback' are briefly illustrated in Table I.1 below. The comparisons are based on an early example of feedback and talkback notes (see Appendix 4).

There are overlaps between the 'feedback' and 'talkback' sheets: in both there is a focus on the text as a final product, through my references to paragraphs, sentence structure, cohesion and grammar. However, it is also possible to see significant differences. In the 'feedback' sheet the emphasis is on the student-writer's text as final product which the tutor is evaluating through the comments exemplified in Table I.1. In the 'talkback' sheet, the text is treated as something which is provisional, in the making, aspects of which are thus still to be explored. The predominant focus and discursive features in both indicate my attempts to both work within, and to move away from, a tutor-directed talking space.

Figure I.1 illustrates how we organised our meetings to talk around the individual student's writing of a particular text. Thus at stage 1, we met to talk either about a draft or an idea that the student-writer was working on for a course essay. For example, the student-writer might talk about how she was thinking of approaching the writing of an essay. This stage might be repeated several times, up to four times in one instance in this research project, or happen only once, depending on the individual student-writer's decision to meet or not with me. At stage 2, the student-writer handed me a final draft. At stage 3, I would read the final draft and make comments (if

Table I.1 Differences between ‘feedback’ and ‘talkback’

	Assessment feedback sheet	Talkback notes sheet
<b>Focus</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Text as finished product</li> <li>Draws on tutor’s implicit understanding of conventions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The making of the text</li> <li>Draws on what the student-writer said about aspects of text</li> </ul>
<b>Discoursal features</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Evaluative language: examples – <i>good, well done, very good</i></li> <li>Directives (direct and indirect): examples – <i>I’d like us/you could have/see notes/more examples would have enhanced/we need to discuss/to discuss</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Questions about future actions: examples – <i>Would you use it again? How will you use them [commas] in future?</i></li> <li>Exploratory questions: examples – <i>Do you feel confident? Do you feel that you understand this? Are you using any new words in this essay? Where will you fit yourself, your personal experience, in?</i></li> </ul>

Source: Based on specific instance – see Appendix 4

I was also the assessor) or read the comments made by the tutor. At stage 4, we discussed the assessment feedback. Stage 5 involved me listening to all of our tape-recorded talk and then making talkback notes. These sheets were based on points that the student-writers had raised in previous talk but which we hadn’t had time to consider, as well as involving an attempt to open up our talk more generally for exploration. The emphasis in stages 1–4 was therefore predominantly on getting on with business as usual of student academic writing, whereas the aim of stages 5 and 6 was to engage in more exploratory and problem-posing talk. Working at constructing opportunities for this kind of cyclical talk was initially, and primarily, a research-oriented

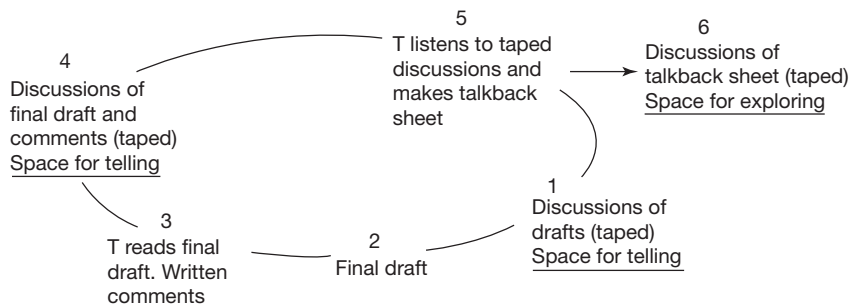


Figure I.1 Talking about one writing task



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