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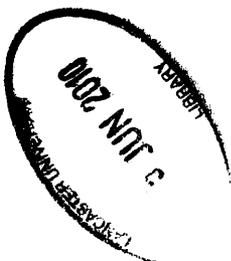
**The reality of study support: a phenomenographic and  
activity theory analysis.**

**Submitted November 2009.**

**This thesis is submitted in part fulfilment for the degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy**

**Department of Educational Research**

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### **Declaration**

This thesis results entirely from my own work and has not been offered previously for any other degree or diploma

Signature.

## **The reality of study support: a phenomenographic and activity theory analysis.**

### **Abstract**

Whilst study support appears to be one of the taken for granted, yet infrequently analysed, features of the higher education landscape increasing student diversity and a move to debate the impact of power, identity and pedagogic discourse on the development of academic literacy signals a climate for change. Nevertheless, within this changing environment very little thinking has taken place about the variation in experience of tutors, support staff and students with respect to activities that are designed to support the development of appropriate academic discourses. This study sets out to explore, and compare, these contrasting experiences of academic endeavour.

For the purposes of this study, a phenomenographic approach has been used to interpret variation in experience of study support across three participant groups in a single university: tutors, support staff and students. Activity Theory is then used as a heuristic device to analyse the historical, social and material contexts of these support activities. In this way, a number of 'fuzzy generalisations' (Bassey, 1999) have been generated around skills focussed study support, learner focussed study support and those forms of study support that focus on the literacy practices of an academic community.

Tentative conclusions suggest that the experiences articulated in this instance can be interpreted as an indication for increased debate around the definition, and purpose, of study support in higher education and, by extrapolation, the concept of academic literacy.

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **Study support in higher education**

Haggis (2006) highlights the difficulties associated with conceptualising models of study support, based, in part, on their situated nature, and in the inconsistency of applied definitions. In fact, a variety of terms have been used by authors to describe study support which include: study support, academic support, student support, tutor guidance, learner support and academic advice with few authors making absolutely clear the distinctions between academic and non academic support and between formal and informal support mechanisms. The most commonly used term in this thesis is *study support* which is defined by Thorpe (2002:108) as “all those elements capable of responding to a known learner, or group of learners, before, during and after the learning process”. In this definition Thorpe adopts something of a deficit approach in her entreaty to develop support mechanisms that match student need as she fails to acknowledge that these needs might include a need for challenge and a need to embrace uncertainty; models of this nature position certain groups of students as unequal partners in the teaching and learning relationship. Indeed, whilst much of the literature relating to study support focuses on specific contexts, using locally understood terms, the assumptions intrinsic to each construct can be discerned in order to analyse the ways in which they position staff and students.

It is argued in this thesis that study support in higher education exists as a result of particular beliefs about the purpose of education and about the respective roles of tutors, learners and, by implication, study support advisors. The fact that structures exist that are designed to offer additional support to

learners beyond the tutor-student relationship reveal the ways in which such institutions conceive undergraduate learning. Whilst pertaining to a different sector of the education system, it is worth noting that in the school sector, where separate support structures have existed for many years, it is increasingly recognised that such practices dislocate support activities from the learning process, act as a barrier to inclusion and impact negatively upon the self esteem of students (Thomas & Vaughan, 2004; Allan, J 2008; Davies et al, 2009).

Despite the fact that study support is often described, on university websites, as a student 'entitlement' and as a necessary structure to enable all students to access the genres and registers of academic discourse, this notion, albeit stemming from a rights perspective, locates the 'difficulty' within the learner. This is evidenced in the tendency to offer additional support for a particular group of learners rather than seeking to address systemic barriers to learning. As such, structures that seek to remediate difficulty beyond the normal teaching and learning processes of the university classroom raise questions about the nature of teaching and learning in higher education, the complexity of academic literacy and the respective roles of staff and students. Similar questions are raised by a body of literature that offers conflicting viewpoints about study support from those authors that convey constructs of study support that are largely skills focussed, to those that are learner focussed, and those that have a focus on the literacy practices of an academic community. Furthermore, the lack of attention to study support in the wider literature on teaching and learning in higher education isolates this area of practice from the context within which it resides.

The position taken in this thesis is that in order to understand the theorisations that exist within the literature, I need to test them in the light of practice as experienced. In addition, my intention is to understand how such practices, and related theorisations, may have developed by examining the social and cultural contexts of a bounded system of study support activity.

## **1.2 The research focus**

The primary purpose of this thesis, therefore, is to explore experiences of study support in one higher education institution; in particular, I am interested in attempting to understand how study support, as a taken for granted aspect of the higher education experience, has developed in the institution under study and how such practices impact on the experiences of students, tutors and support staff. This interest stems from my own role within the institution under study; as a tutor within this context, I have become increasingly intrigued by the assumed lines of demarcation between tutors and support staff and the rationale behind the existence of mechanisms that are designed to meet learner needs.

## **1.3 The research context**

This study is located in a single university for a number of reasons. The first is pragmatic in that I am a member of the academic staff of the university under study and, as a Teaching and Learning Fellow, I am required, and enabled, to review aspects of teaching and learning practice across the university. Beyond this, however, I elected to examine a single university as I believe that study support practices stem from the particular social, historical and cultural context of the environment; albeit within the broader milieu of higher education in England. As such, a study of this length would not allow full examination of the

socio-cultural features of more than one environment risking a superficial analysis of each case.

The university in question has a history of being a teacher education college since 1885 and was awarded Taught Degree Awarding Powers in 2006.

Therefore, this study aims to represent both the experiences of undergraduate students, their tutors and the staff employed to support their studies, and, in addition, an example of practice within the growing genre of new universities.

A search for 'study support' on the university website produced the following result:

"Learning Services can assist you in developing the academic skills you need to study at University. By developing these skills, you will become a better learner and improve your marks!"

However, as a tutor within this environment I am also aware of strategies that academic staff have devised in order to support study and, in particular, to enable their learners to develop appropriate academic literacies. As a result, a pilot study for this thesis was conducted with my own postgraduate students; the results of this study intrigued me as they demonstrated a clear difference between the experiences of students and the intentions of staff. However, it was difficult to discern whether these differences were due to the particular needs of postgraduate students studying for a Masters degree part-time, or indicative of a wider problem.

The management team of the university under study have sought to embrace a major national agenda by creating a Widening Participation Research

Centre claiming, in press releases, that

"The University is a flagship institution for Widening Participation. It leads on Aim Higher, the Government initiative to encourage under-represented groups to enter higher education and houses Action on Access, the national co-ordination team which promotes widening participation activities across the sector".

Whether this research centre and the espoused success of the university in this area stem from genuine debate about the purpose of support activities is unknown, however, I am interested in examining the lived experiences of students and staff in this environment.

Additionally, I believe that increasing student diversity offers space to review and analyse the purpose of structures designed to increase access and support learning. Nevertheless, within this changing environment very little thinking has taken place about the variation in experience of tutors, support staff and students with respect to activities that are designed to support the development of appropriate academic discourses. This study sets out to explore, and compare, these contrasting experiences of academic engagement.

#### **1.4 Research Approach**

In order to explore the structures and processes that define study support, my aim, in this study, is to map variation in experience of such practices.

Phenomenography is the primary research methodology selected to achieve this aim as it is designed to make variation of experiences visible (Åkerlind, 2005). In making this choice I acknowledge that the kind of in-depth detail that can be obtained via other methodologies such as case studies, narrative enquiry or ethnography, to cite three examples, may be lost. However, I do not seek to gain a detailed understanding of the experiences of a small number of students or staff as this perspective already exists in the literature (for example, Fazey & Fazey, 2001; Haggis & Pouget, 2002; Simpson, 2002; Northedge, 2003; Boscolo et al, 2007; Jacklin & Robinson, 2007); rather, I aim

to map variation across a representative sample of staff and students in order to compare experiences and create a basis from which I can begin to understand the socio-cultural factors at play. The latter intention is born of a realisation that a de-contextualised mapping of experiences may obscure more than it illuminates and that learning and teaching is embedded in historical, social and material contexts (Lindblom-Ylanc et al, 2006; Ashwin, 2009). However, as Phenomenography was initially designed to represent, or describe, qualitative variation of the ways in which a phenomenon is experienced this conceptual leap to the analysis of cultural factors impacting upon these experiences would seem to be problematic. In this case, the analysis of the outcome spaces with respect to socio-cultural factors is desirable but I also consider it to be beyond the capabilities of Phenomenographic methodology. Consequently, Scandinavian Activity Theory has been selected as a heuristic device with which I can analyse the organisation and social infrastructures that influence the research outcomes. Scandinavian Activity Theory is a derivation of Soviet Activity Theory which was rooted in the work of Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky whose work was psychological and paid little attention to socio-cultural diversity. However, Activity Theory was re-conceptualised in The West producing the version of Activity Theory that is referred to (Albrechtsen et al, 2001) as Scandinavian Activity Theory. This version of Activity Theory was largely developed by Engeström who argued that in any complex social system there will be competing goals, limited resources, differing values, and a variety of desired outcomes; as such, Engeström argues (1987) that actions are not fully predictable or rational and the most well-planned and streamlined actions

involve failures, disruptions, and unexpected innovations. Such conflicting forces within activities have been termed 'contradictions' (Engeström, 1999:32); recognition of which broadens thinking beyond the activity systems of Soviet Activity Theory towards a consideration of the socio-cultural diversity inherent in multiple, interrelated activity systems.

Whilst many established authors refer to the generic term 'Activity Theory' the distinction between Scandinavian and Soviet perspectives is important in a study that seeks to combine methodological approaches. Whilst the Soviet version of Activity Theory resides within a psychological ontology, the Scandinavian version of Activity Theory is based upon a relational ontology, as will be discussed further in chapter three, and, as such is compatible with the relational nature of Phenomenographic methodology. Where I have used the work of authors that refer to Activity Theory in a generic sense, I have selected those aspects of the literature that do not contradict this ontological stance. As such, Scandinavian Activity Theory will be employed as a heuristic device to provide a theoretical framework within which collective social engagement can be analysed.

Furthermore, whilst I am particularly interested in the contradictions that occur within, and between, activity systems I also intend to consider the relative power dynamics between interacting activity systems. However, as Activity Theory does not extend to such analysis I have elected to employ Scalar Analysis, a technique used in Physics, to achieve this aim. I intend to argue that Scalar Analysis is a useful conceptual tool that extends Activity Theory analysis by modelling power differentials.

## **1.5 Claims to significance**

This thesis aims to make two original contributions to the field. Firstly, by examining the perspectives of students, academic staff and support staff, this study attempts to address the fact that whilst there have been a number of studies that have examined study support from the perspective of tutors, study support staff, or students, there have been few studies that examine all three perspectives and no comprehensive analysis of the variation in experience of all three groups or of the socio-cultural influences on such experiences.

Secondly, I intend to use Scalar Analysis to model power relations between participant groups within an Activity Theory analysis and critique the value of this technique.

## **1.6 Research Questions**

The specific research questions that I intend to address in this study are:

1. What are the qualitatively different ways in which students, tutors and study support staff experience study support in the university under study?
2. What are the historical, social and material factors that influence these experiences?
3. How do these socio-cultural factors impact on power differentials between each group?

Whilst the research approach selected indicates my belief in the socio-cultural specificity of study support practices, I intend to use these research questions to create a number of 'fuzzy generalisations' (Bassegy, 1999) about study support in this instance.

## **1.7 The structure of this study**

This introduction is followed by a critical review of relevant literature, in Chapter Two, which offers an exploration of the different ways in which study support has been conceptualised beyond the context under investigation.

From this, a number of ways of understanding study support, and the implications of each, will be discussed.

Chapter Three of this thesis explores the methodological approaches selected to map variation of experience between students, tutors and support staff and to analyse the historical, social and cultural features of study support in the university culture under study.

Chapter Four presents my interpretation of variation in this context and

Chapter Five, an Activity Theory analysis of the socio-cultural factors that I believe contribute to the production of experiences discussed here. Scalar Analysis is used, in Chapter Five, to model the power differentials between interacting systems.

The discussion, in Chapter Six, is focussed around a number of 'fuzzy generalisations' (Bassegy, 1999) that seek to compare, and analyse, how the literature can be used to understand the differences between variation across each participant group, the implication of historical, social and cultural influences and, by extrapolation, issues of power and identity.

Finally, this study concludes, in Chapter Seven, with some consideration of the strengths and weaknesses of this thesis, of the knowledge claims that this study can make and of future research possibilities.

## **Chapter Two: study support; a review of relevant literature**

### **2.1 Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to understand how study support is conceptualised in the literature and how these theorisations can be used to comprehend the support mechanisms in the university under study. The model of student writing designed by Lea and Street (1998) has been used to organise this literature review and the three resulting constructs are explored in order to analyse the ways in which tutors, support staff and students are positioned by each perspective.

### **2.2 A three tier model of study support**

Study support systems often present challenges for any learning organisation and for the student and staff populations of that institution. As mentioned in Chapter One, Haggis (2006) highlights the difficulties associated with conceptualising models of study support, based on their situated nature, and in the inconsistency of applied definitions. This exploration of literature seeks to examine the inherent assumptions of different conceptualisations of study support in the higher education context and the ways in which they position students, tutors and support staff. These conceptualisations include constructs that are largely skills focussed, those that are learner focussed, and those that have a focus on the literacy practices of an academic community. This typology has been developed from the model of student writing offered by Lea and Street (1998:172) who identified three forms of student writing in higher education:

*Student writing as technical and instrumental skills (study skills / student deficit)*

*Student writing as transparent medium of representation (academic socialisation / acculturation of students into academic discourse)*

and

*Student writing as meaning making and contested (student's negotiation of literacy practices).*

Whilst Lea and Street are describing student writing practices here, rather than study support, their model offers a useful representation for the ways in which writing practices, and as a consequence, support practices, are conceived in higher education.

It is also important to note that these forms of writing are described, by Lea and Street (1998), as hierarchically inclusive, in that student writing as meaning making and contested necessarily encompasses student writing as a transparent medium of representation which, itself, incorporates student writing as technical and instrumental skills. Therefore whilst, for the purposes of this chapter, I have differentiated between literature that conceptualises study support as skills focussed, literature that views study support as learner focussed, and literature that holds a literacy practices focus, I also acknowledge that the aforementioned hierarchical inclusivity serves to blur these distinctions. Consequently, whilst much of the writing around skills focussed support critiques this method in order to argue for learner focussed or social practice focussed models the assumptions evident across constructs are less clearly defined. It is these assumptions that interest me most and form the basis of this review.

## 2.3 Skills focussed Study Support

Skills focussed study support services have been described in a variety of ways over the last two decades from services that 'support the educational process' (Wagner, 1995) to those that 'enhance academic outcomes' (Sewart, 1993) or respond to 'skill deficit' (Brasley, 2008). Furthermore, whilst much of the literature is critical of this form of study support, responsibility for skills focussed study support is described as being vested *either* in study support staff (Chanock, 2007; Jacklin & Robinson, 2007; Brasley, 2008) *or* in academic staff (Fazey & Fazey, 2001; Haggis & Pouget, 2002; Peelo, 2002, Wingate, 2007) but rarely described as a joint endeavour. As a result, many arguments focus upon who is best placed to support students, rather than how study support might be usefully conceptualised, emphasising the demarcation lines between staff groups.

Nonetheless, on closer reading of the skills focussed literature a clear assumption of skills deficit indicates a predominance of Brasley's definition when conceptualising skills focussed study support, in some cases as a reason to move away from this construct and, in others, the underlying assumption of student deficit remains unchallenged. This assumption is most evident in skills focussed studies that explore tutor definitions of study support. For example, Fazey & Fazey (2001: 358) found, through interview and observation, that some academic staff "reinforce the view of ability as a fixed entity, not modifiable through effort or experience, perhaps to the detriment of students' progress". This argument highlights a deeper concern, namely, that if a skills deficit model of study support is viewed within the context of ability as a fixed entity, academic staff may be inclined to act dismissively towards

students whom they believe to be unequal to the demands of higher education and devolve responsibility for such students to support staff. Indeed, if the premise of study support in universities is of hegemonic definitions based around student deficit, or need, then it is less than surprising that support mechanisms are designed to ameliorate that deficit. However, it must also be accepted that this positions those students who access such services as disempowered beneficiaries of learning experiences rather than as independent learners or as partners in their own learning.

Furthermore, whether certain students are viewed as skill deficient, or not, Bharuthram & McKenna argue that “after all, the mainstream lecturers who have set the assessment task are often incapable of making the required literacy norms overt” (2006:497). If this assertion were to be accepted we might expect the power dynamic between tutor and student to shift as it could be argued that if university cultures evolve from a skill focussed conceptualisation of study support, staff should possess the ability to disaggregate and explain these skills for students facing assessment; yet the evidence gleaned over a number of years suggests that this is not the case. In 1998, Lea & Street conducted interviews in two universities in the South of England, interviewing 23 staff and 47 students and found that whilst academic staff can:

“describe what constitutes successful writing, difficulties arose when they attempted to make explicit what a well-developed argument looks like in a written assignment” (1998:163).

Likewise Peelo (2002) argued that university staff often hold different concepts of writing development and Saltmarsh & Saltmarsh (2008) expressed concern

about tutor understanding of academic literacy. These findings undermine the assumption that the tutor is best placed to offer skills based study support and make it unsurprising that in 2000, Tapper & Gruba commented upon the “tendency for academics to refer students to learning support units rather than addressing students’ academic learning skills themselves” (2000:56). The resulting view of tutor vulnerability positions the tutor in a more balanced power relationship with the equally vulnerable student; both being unsure about aspects of academic literacy. However, if, as a result, responsibility for these aspects of study support is to be vested in centralised support mechanisms, universities must accept that study support services are not for all students; rather they are for students with particular needs or difficulties. The corollary of this model is that academic staff are responsible for the academic development of students without additional learning needs which presents a number of questions and challenges. Firstly, if academic staff only see themselves as responsible for students who can access their teaching we must ask questions about university wide perspectives of writing practices and the purposes of study support. Secondly, if, as claimed by Moscati (2004), we are seeing fundamental shifts in the student demograph then it could be argued that these historically conceived models of study support need to be reviewed; that such practices have been described as “deeply embedded in the structures and divisions that situate academic writing provision in the margins of the academy” (Burke & Hermerschmidt, (2005:346) makes this problematic.

In addition, Gamache (2002:278), amongst others, maintains that teaching study skills out of context does not work because students may not be able to

see the complexity and purpose of what they are doing. This argument misses the broader point that skills focussed forms of support, even when taught in context, do little to develop academic literacy and may, as argued by Simpson (2002), be counter-productive as students “either try to take the advice and struggle with methods that are not actually helpful to them or they ignore the advice and lose confidence in methods that have suited them reasonable well” (2002:135). Indeed, whether academic staff have the inclination to disaggregate specific skills, or not, it must be noted that Brew & Pesata (2004) questioned the assumption that a set of skills focussed support mechanisms are ‘ipso facto, a good thing’ and were unable to find any work that discussed the extent to which such structures have successfully achieved their outcomes. As such, if university support mechanisms predominantly offer a skills focussed approach, they are in the unenviable position of offering a service that has not been proven to make a significant difference. The existence of such mechanisms describes an ‘institutional habitus’ (Avramadis & Skidmore, 2004) which positions the tutor as subject expert, rather than learning expert, and the student as someone who either needs these forms of additional support, or doesn’t.

Interestingly, in a study largely informed by student voice, Jacklin & Robinson (2007) found that when asked who provided study support over 50% of students cited friends with less than 20% identifying academic staff and only 2% specifically identifying student support services. What makes these results more surprising is that Jacklin and Robinson were examining wider notions of academic and welfare support rather than study support specifically. If only 20% of students receive academic and welfare support from tutors and

only 2% from student support services, one has to question the percentage that receive specific study support from either staff group and the extent to which, in the words of Brew and Pesata, such services are 'ipso facto a good thing'.

This point was raised in the earlier findings of Haggis & Pouget (2002:53) who contended that the generic nature of skills based study services results in "students seeing study skills as an end in themselves, rather than as tools to be used to reach their goals". Whilst this concern is genuinely expressed I would question the preferred option of viewing study skills as "tools to be used to reach their goals." Such an aspiration arguably atomises study skills and results in a situation whereby:

"when studying for an examination students are often more concerned with learning ideas and concepts separately from each book, or source, rather than integrating and organising the learning material in a coherent way (Boscolo et al, 2007: 434).

Moreover, whilst systems that encourage the view of study skills as 'tools to be used to reach their goals' might position support staff as essential to the academic process, they also frame academic literacy as a set of skills rather than a form of cultural discourse. This realisation, Brew and Pesata argued in 2004, should cast some doubt about the widespread acceptance of these practices in university cultures.

To add an additional complication to these arguments research conducted ten years ago by Brown & Esson (1999) paid some attention to structured support mechanisms and found that, in general, university policies governing quality of study support had little to do with departmental practice. Jacobs (2005) and

Dhillon et al (2008) describe similar departmental inconsistencies arguing, on the one hand, for the creation of discursive space to allow collaboration between academic literacy practitioners and departmental staff (Jacobs, 2005:475), and, on the other, for greater departmental responsibility (Dhillon et al, 2008) for study support. Each of these propositions has implications for the ways in which staff and students are positioned. Firstly, whilst a discursive space for support staff and tutors might serve to increase collaboration between these staff groups it excludes students; potentially positioning them as a recipient of learning rather than as engaged with the process of learning. Secondly, greater departmental responsibility for study support, as Dhillon et al describe it, merely relocates a deficit model of support to specific disciplines to enhance 'take up' of what have been described, here, as flawed practices.

Therefore, whilst Wingate (2007) argues that undergraduate services not only assume homogenous skill acquisition but, more worryingly, that a "skills approach to the enhancement of learning, provided by support services, is based on a deficiency model" (2007:391) I am arguing that a 'skills approach to the enhancement of learning' provided by academic staff is also based on a deficiency model. Indeed, any approach based on the acquisition of a discrete set of skills must necessarily distinguish between those that have the skills, and those who do not, resulting in systems designed to impart these skills to a group of students perceived to be skill deficient. These systems, wherever they are located, position the students as either skilful or skill deficit even though these judgements may be based upon insecure evidence bases.

Overall, whilst the literature around study support recognises fundamental shifts in the composition of the student population within higher education,

(Moscati, 2004) significant sections of the literature retain a traditional view of study support as a skills based concept which does little to develop academic discourse. Additionally, whilst growing interest in a reconceptualisation of study support, including in the U.K. context, attention given to the first year experience (Yorke & Longden, 2008), is serving to refocus the debate, it would seem that these studies are drawing the same conclusions as before. For instance, when aiming to conceptualise the teaching of generic attributes Barrie (2007) expressed concern that academics hold qualitatively different understandings of the nature of these attributes. Moreover, in relation to competencies for life-long learning Kember et al concluded that even where universities believe in, and adopt, generic models of support: “despite extensive funding in some quarters, overall, efforts to foster the development of generic attributes appear to have met with limited success” (2007:611). Such concerns, expressed over a number of years, have resulted in the development of conceptualisations of study support beyond those that are purely skills focussed recognising that skills focussed responses view the cause of the problem as located *within the student*, whilst tending to leave “conventional goals of higher education learning largely unchallenged” (Haggis, 2006:523).

#### **2.4 Learner Focussed Study Support**

In contrast to skills focussed study support, learner focussed support mechanisms have been described as “the key means through which course materials are articulated; taking into account the interests of diverse groups of students as individuals” (Tait, 1995: 82). In this sense, over a decade ago, Tait identified “conversation .... as a value which should not be lost in technicist

approaches to systems of learning management” (1995:84) and presupposed that study support activities be aimed at all learners. In fact, by identifying conversation as a value upon which study support should be based Tait demonstrates a clear assumption that learner focussed study support should do more than take the perceived needs of a learner, or group of learners, into consideration. Indeed, the assertion that conversation should be central to study support suggests a focus on learner voice, student empowerment and a move towards genuine participation positioning the student at the centre of the learning experience.

Whilst it is easy to assume that this aligns with the conclusions of Granger & Benke (1998) who reported that students find programmes supportive:

“not because there is a coordinator of student support available from 9 to 3 to solve their problems, but because the programme was designed with the student perspective in mind by faculty and staff” (1998:02).

a seemingly subtle difference between these perspectives represents a significant philosophical divergence. By designing programmes with the student perspective in mind, as advocated by Granger and Benke, one may either consult students, review past evaluations or estimate student perspective. Such a degree of leeway presents a contrast to the less negotiable argument of Tait that conversation, as a value, should not be lost. In order to value conversation one must, firstly, be prepared to enter into conversation and, presumably, to value the perspectives of others. However, if the premise of study support in universities is one that values the perspectives of the learner staff may need to review long held assumptions about the purpose of study support. Furthermore, this model would assume high levels

of negotiation with students with regard to the design of support mechanisms and some acceptance of the fact that students might not request those forms of support currently conceived, and staffed, by the university (Devereaux & Wilson, 2008). For example, if students decided that they wanted the university to enable an academic literacies approach to their learning, through which they could “learn new subjects and develop their knowledge about new areas of study” (Lea and Street 1998:158) academic staff may be forced to review their teaching approaches and study support staff their role.

An alternative approach was advocated by Thorpe (2002) who argued that study support mechanisms cannot be effective when the study supporter does not have any concept of the ‘identity’ of the learner suggesting that the tutor is best placed to develop this knowledge. Specifically, such an approach is dependent upon an understanding of what Ferla, Valcke & Schuyten (2009) describe as a student’s model of learning; comprising his/her self-efficacy beliefs, learning conceptions, attributions for academic performance and assessment expectations. In point of fact, Ferla, Valcke and Schuyten argue that “a student’s ‘basic’ study strategy is primarily determined by their perceived control over learning.” (2009:198). Acceptance of this belief not only requires university structures to adapt to the needs of known learners, but also requires university staff to commit to enter into negotiations, with students, about the forms of study support that best achieve this. A lack of such collaboration, Thorpe argued back in 2002, can only lead to generalised programmes that take no account of diversity. Thus these authors contend that learner voice must be central to learner focussed study support.

Moreover, it is worth noting that studies that focus on the importance of legitimising the student voice (Brown & Esson, 1999; Malik, 2000; Brew & Pesata, 2004; Ivankova & Stick, 2007) pay attention to factors that contribute to student persistence (Ivankova & Stick, 2007) and are increasingly based around learner-led models of study support. This shift, from learner focussed models of support, is significant. Learner focussed models of support, whilst acknowledging a need to take account of specific learner needs, vests ownership of support activities with staff whereas learner-led models of support shares ownership of study support strategies with the students for whom they are designed.

Nonetheless, whilst this model would, arguably, place students at the centre of the process it has been reasoned that when making the transition to higher education many students do not know what their needs will be and, therefore, need to rely upon the greater knowledge of university staff (Yorke & Longden, 2008). As such, the fact that student voice should inform support mechanisms does little to reduce the socially constructed forms of control that regulate and legitimise support practices. To further complicate matters, the underlying assumption that student voice should inform support mechanisms is certainly not universally held. Haggis & Pouget (2002) investigated the study experiences of a group of young students from families with no history of participation in higher education and concluded that:

“it could be suggested that initial lack of academic success experienced by these students was linked to an overall confusion about the nature and purposes of institutional learning, which resulted in a lack of confidence, and very limited strategies for managing the practical and intellectual work required (2002: 331).

It would seem, in this case, that tutors and study support staff felt able to estimate student need without engaging in any form of consultation with students other than end of year evaluations. It was equally evident, in this case, that whilst the authors clearly demonstrated concern for the student experience, student deficit, rather than student potential, was foregrounded in this study. Therefore, whilst this approach claims to move beyond the instrumentalism of a skills focussed approach, it positions staff, and students, within the donor-recipient relationships implied by the skills focussed literature. Interestingly, Blythman & Orr (2002) set down a gauntlet by suggesting that once a model of student potential is adopted, educational institutions need to look at failure as an institutional concern; perhaps this could explain reluctance, in some quarters, to adopt such an approach.

Nevertheless, much of the learner focussed literature around study support contests that institutions need to develop: holistic concepts of student support (Tait, 2000, Drew, 2001; Jacklin & Robinson, 2007) increased understanding of student characteristics (Tait, 2000; Drew, 2001) increased student-led understanding of the specific demands of courses or programmes (Tait 2000); and increased understanding of the centrality of metacognition to student support (Fazey & Fazey, 2001; Gamache, 2002) with Gamache asserting that:

If learners are to develop useful, personal approaches to learning, they must work 'backward' from their current techniques to see what epistemological and ontological assumptions are informing these practices (2002: 286).

What is lacking, in many of these studies, is any debate about the ways in which staff and students are positioned by such processes. For instance, whilst it has been acknowledged that many students need to rely upon the

greater knowledge of university staff (Yorke & Longden, 2008) it could equally be argued that the adoption of a communities of practice approach (Lave & Wenger, 1991) would enable students to view their literacy practices as legitimate peripheral participation rather than something requiring remedial support recognising that participation:

'refers not just to local events of engagement in certain activities with certain people, but to a more encompassing process of being active participants in the *practices* of social communities and constructing *identities* in relation to these communities' (Wenger, 1999:04).

Indeed, the learner focussed literature demonstrates a widespread acceptance that academic staff understand student characteristics and the metacognitive strategies employed by undergraduate students. This assumption results in authors, such as Peelo, arguing that tutors should take control of study support as learning services staff "often struggle to leave behind assumptions of a mechanistic approach to specific academic tasks, which can encourage limited solutions" (2002:162) and that:

educational problems in an era of mass higher education cannot be resolved by employing more and more learning support workers to provide individual support. (Peelo, 2002:170).

Nonetheless, whilst Peelo advocated learner centred approaches to study support she failed to recognise the equally limited nature of the depth of understanding held by some academic staff in relation to student identity and experience and positioned academic staff as the most knowledge source of student learning. If this argument is to retain credibility Peelo, and others, must address the aforementioned concerns about the limitations of tutor understanding of academic literacy development.

For example, whilst Drew (2001) argued that:

“High-quality teaching, that focuses on developing student autonomy in learning, will offer opportunities for the development of all individuals, including those who might be at risk” (2001:359).

she also reported that the same students felt that it was important for allowances to be made for their individual needs, but considered that lecturers often assumed their needs were identical (2001:314). In this study, the focus was clearly on student deficit and the conclusion was that tutor estimates of student need were too generic to be of use.

In an article that explored networks of support for disabled and non-disabled students, Jacklin & Robinson (2007) found that, almost without exception, support needs identified by students were related to their specific needs as a learner, that is, it was not generic help that they were identifying but support which they felt would help them achieve their desired learning goal (2007:117). As such, disabled learners focussed on a need to understand academic discourse, from the novice perspective, rather than on the needs associated with their particular disability; this mirrored the espoused needs of non-disabled peers. In fact, Tait (2000:33) made the point that as individual students assume more responsibility for their own professional development, in a rapidly changing world, they will expect institutions to pay greater attention to individual, rather than institutional, needs. This repositioning of the student as client, rather than recipient, whilst unpalatable to some, may serve to increase accountability for the processes that exist in the name of student support.

In summary, whilst learner focussed models of study support, arguably, involve some thinking around notions of student voice and identity, like skills focussed models, they view the cause of the problem as located largely *within the student* albeit in a benevolent, rather than pejorative, sense.

## **2.5 Study support focussed around literacy practices**

Consideration of the nature of both writing, and learning, has influenced socio-literate approaches to academic development (Johns, 1997) which foreground literacy as a social practice and view writing as “an act embedded in a social context rather than an individual’s act of discovery and creation” (Clark & Ivanic, 1997:82). As such, researchers involved in the ‘New Literacy Studies’ (Swales, 1990; Gee, 1996; Lea and Street, 1998; Ivanic, 1998; Jones, et al, 1999; Lillis & Turner, 2001 & Street, 2001) argued that literacy cannot be viewed as technical mastery of a discrete set of decoding and encoding skills as sections of the literature relating to study support might suggest. These authors also highlighted the need to distinguish between approaches that treat literacy as a fixed set of practices to which students need to be initiated and those that view literacy practices as socially constructed and therefore open to challenge and change.

Indeed, in the U.K. Lea and Street (1998:157) argued that the:

“models used to understand student writing do not adequately take account of the importance of issues of identity and the institutional relationships of power and authority that surround, and are embedded within, diverse student writing practice across the University”.

Thus, one of the primary assumptions of an academic literacies approach is that in order to understand writing practices, and therefore the forms of

support that enable the development of these practices, institutions must relinquish some of the power and authority that dictates student writing. In this way, all forms of writing practice can be reviewed, and understood, in terms of their intended meaning in order to enable genuine debate around academic development. If we were to extend this argument to incorporate all forms of academic discourse, contested meaning making in relation to academic reading and speaking would increase the level of debate around study support beyond deficit notions of student need. This would position staff and students in a more evenly balanced relationship where meaning making could be contested by any member of an academic community despite the fact that staff *may* have a greater knowledge of academic literacy. As such, the value of an individual contribution could come from an ability to contest meaning rather than in the existence of certain forms of knowledge.

In addition, Lea (2004:741) argues that:

“the strength of the academic literacies approach is that it does not assume that students are merely acculturated unproblematically into the academic culture through engaging with the discourses and practices of established practitioners”.

Thus, an assumption central to this approach is that immersion in a discipline alone offers insufficient support for aspiring members of that discipline. That Lea and others (for example Devereaux & Wilson, 2008) advocate the adoption of an academic literacies approach to course design indicates a holistic, rather than fragmented, view of study support whereby each learner’s engagement with a wide range of texts is central to course design reducing the potential for development of discursive gaps.

Similarly, Hirst et al (2004:67), when discussing the massification of Australian Higher education, argued that “systems of support for learning are as important as the delivery of subjects and courses”. Hirst et al have sought to reconceptualise the academic literacies approach within a specific community of practice, arguing that we “cannot research learning without researching the human relationship within which it occurs, and the social context within which it is appropriated and used” (2004: 75). In terms of study support this paradigm assumes academic support to be central to the teaching and learning function; indeed it would seem inconceivable, from this perspective, to send students to a central service for academic literacy support.

Therefore, if the premise of study support in universities is one of an academic literacies approach that seeks to understand the nature of academic learning by exploring the literacy practices of both staff, and students, this has significant implications, as argued by Lea (2004), for course design. The issues raised by Lea, relating to meaning making, language and identity, have implications for all aspects of teaching and learning, including assessment. Furthermore, if responsibility for the construction of meanings lies not only with the individual student and the tutor but, more importantly, “is located at institutional and social levels” (Burke & Hermerschmidt, 2005: 350) this approach would require university wide re-conceptualisation of the teaching, learning and assessment function, and, thus, a review of how members of a university community understand study support in a context where study support advisors arguably have “second class intellectual status” (Rose, 1998:17).

In this way conceptualising academic writing as a social practice challenges the prevailing staff and student hierarchies and resonates with constructs of social learning theory that explores the relationship between learning and the social situations in which it occurs (Lave and Wenger, 1991:15). Whilst an examination of situated learning is beyond the scope of this study, the links between writing as a social practice and social learning theory are worth noting.

Further explication of the academic literacies approach was offered by Lea and Street, in 2006, when they drew a distinction between academic socialisation and academic literacy arguing that the latter:

“does not view literacy practices as residing entirely in disciplinary and subject-based communities but examines how literacy practices from other institutions (e.g., government, business, university bureaucracy) are implicated in what students need to learn and do. (2006:370).

Focussing on concepts of student writer identity within an academic community, they argued for the adoption of disciplinary based academic literacies models as a framework for curricular and instructional design in higher education concentrating on the need to “foreground the variety and specificity of institutional practices, and students’ struggles to make sense of these” (2006:376). In this way, whilst Lea and Street are writing about broader concepts of teaching and learning, we can extrapolate from their argument that the academic literacies approach advocates a *student potential* study support model rather than one that focuses on student deficit and that the literacy practices of academic disciplines can be viewed as “varied social practices associated with different communities” (Lea and Street, 2006: 368).

A corollary of Lea and Street's argument is that universities must develop an increased understanding of student-institution interaction (Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1998; Smith et al 2004; Jacklin & Robinson, 2007) and, arguably, an increased awareness of where the institution, or course itself, creates barriers to learning (Durkin & Main, 2002; Haggis, 2006). To apply these principles to study support mechanisms, an academic literacies approach must do more than privilege student voice, as argued for in learner focussed approaches, rather, the academic literacies approach requires a levelling of power across all members of the academic community. In this way, concepts of academic writing in a subject, or discipline, can be contested and negotiated by staff, and students, as equal partners in academic discourse. Whether such a system would be popular amongst the staff or student populations of higher education institutions is arguable, however, this aim is an indisputable features of an academic literacies approaches.

Therefore, it is, perhaps, interesting to note that whilst a number of authors move towards notions of academic literacies, whether explicitly or by inference, there remains a distinct divide between those that advocate tutor responsibility for the development of these spaces and those that predominantly advocate peer support.

Highlighting the centrality of the tutor role, in a study conducted over a decade ago, Lea & Street (1998) found that what seemed to be an appropriate piece of writing in one field, or indeed for one individual tutor, was often seen to be quite inappropriate for another. In fact, Lea and Street also discovered that although students frequently had guidelines, either from individual tutors or in the form of departmental documents on essay writing, these often did not help

them very much with this level of writing and that students could assimilate this general advice on writing 'techniques' and 'skills' but found it difficult to move from the general to using this advice in a particular text in a particular disciplinary context (1998:164). This evidence would suggest that whilst, as discussed, the academic literacies approach does not view literacy practices as residing entirely in disciplinary and subject-based communities, support for the development of academic literacy must do exactly that. However, if, as Kember (1997) asserted at around the same time that:

"Many university academics hardly consider themselves "teachers" at all, instead visualising themselves more as a member of their discipline" (1997:255).

then one can suggest that such support is entirely dependent upon tutor willingness to undertake this role; whether academic staff see disciplinary specific literacy practices as an aspect of teaching and learning is debateable. Additionally, a disciplinary based model, whilst acknowledging the varied discourse practices of specific subjects, must also take note of wider literacy practices from within, and beyond the institution in question. Whether this model creates, or dissipates, a role for central support staff is, again, debateable and with many members of staff having a vested interest in the continuation of separate support mechanisms this model of support seems to be somewhat controversial.

Nonetheless, if we are to accept the view asserted by Lea and Street (1998) and Crossling & Webb (2002:06), amongst others, that writing takes on different forms across disciplinary fields, and that writing is a social practice of the particular discipline rather than a set of skills to be transferred to any

setting, then one could, once again, return to the argument that support for writing, alongside other forms of study support, must become the responsibility of subject tutors. This argument was developed further by Northedge who claimed that:

“When the student speaks in class or writes an assignment the teacher, (as an expert in the subject discourse) is in a position to guess the discursive content the students are starting from, sense the intended meaning of their utterances and (taking advantage of the powers of inter-subjective framing) respond in a way which shows the student how to refocus their propositions in line with mainstream usage within the discourse (2003: 178)”.

This perspective positions the tutor as both a subject expert and as possessing an expert understanding of academic literacy suggesting that centrally based support staff have little input into this aspect of academic endeavour.

Similar points have been made by D’Andrea & Gosling who advocated the “systematic academic orientation of students, within disciplines, in ways that recognise the distinctive features of ‘pedagogical communities’ and discipline cultures” (2005: 192) and Wingate (2007: 395) who argued that disciplinary differences in the construction of knowledge means that the support of subject tutors, rather than that of external ‘learning experts’ is needed. Nevertheless, cautionary notes have been voiced by Bharuthram & McKenna (2006:497) who contest that:

“The understanding that language is not a neutral instrument for conveying discipline content, but actively constructs and positions knowledge in certain ways is very difficult for some lecturers to grasp”.

An academic literacies approach would assume that lecturers would willingly create spaces for students or support staff to contest knowledge creation and

language use, however, Bharuthram & McKenna also note that most lecturers are hired for their content knowledge and may never have reflected on the philosophical and ideological basis of this content positing that:

“Lecturers are often unaware of the extent to which academic literacy is specific to the academy and that it comprises fairly significant differences across disciplines” (2006:497).

The assumption inherent in this argument is that whilst lecturers might be, in theory, best placed to support the development of academic literacy practices for students many do not have the requisite knowledge, or inclination, to do so. This concern could impact negatively on the perceived value of highly specialist tutors who, whilst possessing strong subject knowledge and high levels of research output, do not accept responsibility for student development in this way.

In this context, it is, perhaps, of some concern that Harland and Staniforth (2008:669) contend that the organisation and work of academic development in higher education is fragmented and that there is a:

“recognised tension between an institutionally focused service model that could be everything to everyone and one that could be distinguished as more conventionally ‘academic’ with theoretical knowledge as the basis for practice.” (2008:671).

Perhaps, therefore, it could be argued that such tensions explain the emergence of peer support strategies that, previously, appeared to be the domain of postgraduate education. For example, a study conducted ten years ago by Brown & Esson (1999) reported that the overwhelming majority of students stated that collegiality among students, provided by their peers, was a major benefit of their postgraduate education. Brown and Esson did,

however, express some concern that this sense of intellectual community seemed to be provided by students, for students, and was seen to be noticeably lacking as an initiative of staff (1999:08). This point was developed, by Cochrane (2000) who, in an account of his own experiences suggests that peer support creates a:

‘synergy generated by their prior knowledge and skills, with the function of the tutor as a knowledgeable authority figure altering to that of a facilitator’ (2000:26).

Cochrane was talking, here, of more experienced PhD students offering peer support to novice students and he discussed a necessary change in focus of the tutor role that might be unwelcome in some disciplines. Nevertheless, if we were to apply this model to study support for undergraduate students it could be argued that literacy practices could be supported within peer groups from the same discipline. Whilst such peers may be equally unknowing with respect to discipline specific forms of discourse, given the aforementioned points about lack of tutor knowledge, peer support could do more to develop academic literacy practices than unwilling, or ill-informed tutor support.

In fact, when relating peer support to undergraduate studies Drew (2001) cited the autonomy expected in higher education as the main reason for increasing peer support but also warned that “peers were not a replacement for staff tuition” (2001:324). Once again, this cautionary note was echoed by Durkin & Main (2002) who highlight the tension created by the fact that a substantial body of knowledge is, by and large, as yet unknown to peers (2002:31).

In all, whilst some authors are moving towards notions of community focussed study support, and others are advocating an academic socialisation or

academic literacy approach, there remains a lack of clarity and detail about the roles of tutors and students in a number of these models and little acknowledgement of any role for generic study support staff. Nonetheless, this approach views the cause of the problem as located *beyond the student* seeing staff attitude and university structures as equally likely to create unnecessary barriers to the development of academic literacy practices.

## **2.6 Conclusions.**

This short review of literature raises a number of issues about the ways in which different conceptualisations of study support position tutors, support staff and students.

Skills based forms of support, when centrally located, position the tutor as subject expert, the member of support staff as literacy expert and the student as either skilful or skill deficient. However, when these forms of support are located in specific disciplines, tutor ability to disaggregate literacy skills is questionable and the role of support staff is less clearly defined, if at all. What is clear, in both instances, is that skills focussed support mechanisms are predicated on a deficit notion of the types of learner that require these mechanisms and are designed by the university, with little, if any, input from students.

In contrast, learner focussed forms of study support position learner identity and learner voice as central to the process. As such, it is easy to assume that these forms of support empower learners but this is countered by the maintenance of a deficit approach to study support. As such, learner focussed support systems are designed around perceived or espoused needs but, like

skills focussed strategies, often aim to remediate perceived deficit rather than develop academic discourse for all members of the academic community. In addition, learner-focussed models of support position the tutor, and support staff, as reflective and responsive practitioners rather than deliverers of a predetermined curriculum.

Finally, support structures that focus upon the literacy practices of an academic community position all members of the academic community as having the capacity to contest literacy norms and knowledge claims. Whilst advocates of this approach accept that many students may know little about discipline specific forms of discourse they assert that academic writing as a social practice challenges the prevailing staff and student hierarchies. A corollary of this is that in order to adopt an academic literacies approach to the development of academic discourse, universities may need to review the ways in which they define, and enact, teaching, learning and assessment.

My own research aims to address the fact that whilst I have reviewed a number of studies that have examined study support from the perspective of tutors, study support staff, and students, there have been few studies that examine all three perspectives and no comprehensive analysis of the variation in experience of all three groups. As such, I hope to map such variation, as experienced in a single university, against the constructs explored here; that is, to ascertain whether skills focussed, learner focussed or academic literacy focussed practices prevail at the university under study and how these cultures position staff and students.

In line with Lea and Street (1998) I view these constructs as hierarchically inclusive; this complements the hierarchical inclusivity inherent in Phenomenography which will be discussed in greater detail in the next Chapter. In addition, Chapter Three will discuss how I intend to analyse the social and cultural contexts that influence study support in this instance in order to understand the historical, social and material contexts that produce the experiences under investigation.

## **Chapter Three: Methodology**

### **3.1 Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the methods employed within this study to address the research questions detailed, and discussed, in the previous two chapters. Central to this discussion is an examination of the rationale behind the two main methodological choices made in order to achieve the stated aims of this project. The first of these relates to the choice of Phenomenography as the primary research methodology and the second to the use of Scandinavian Activity Theory as a heuristic device. Therefore this chapter starts with some consideration of the research paradigm selected, and the compatibility of Phenomenography and Scandinavian Activity Theory. This is followed by a section detailing how the research data was generated and the ethical and practical considerations involved. Finally, this chapter concludes with a section on data analysis that discusses how each methodology contributes to this analysis.

### **3.2 Selecting a research paradigm.**

As demonstrated in the review of literature, research around study support tends to focus on the experiences of students or of support staff or on the views of curriculum developers. In each of these fields existing studies indicate that there are distinctly different ways that study support can be experienced. What is lacking is an analysis of experience across students, tutors *and* support staff in order to analyse the ways in which different groups engage with a specific educational culture.

Phenomenography has been selected as the primary research methodology for this study as it is designed to make variation of experiences visible; to

present alternative views (Åkerlind, 2005) and is identified as a process more of discovery than of verification (Säljö, 1997). Nonetheless, I am not claiming that Phenomenography is the only methodology that presents alternative views or aims to discover more than verify; Phenomenographic methods were selected, in this instance, due to my specific interest in mapping variation of experience across three communities. In point of fact one of the strengths of Phenomenography, as I see it, is that:

“It provides a way of looking at collective human experience of phenomena holistically despite the fact that such phenomena may be perceived differently by different people and under different circumstances” (Åkerlind 2005: 72).

As such, Phenomenographic methods would appear to allow me to identify the qualitatively different ways in which students, tutors and study support staff experience study support in this instance.

The decision to employ an additional heuristic device was made, in part, as a response to Buchanan (2003) who argues for more studies to present multiple perspectives and interpretations even though he acknowledges that few methods support this. Whilst I want to examine variation across each group, rather than analyse detailed, individual, case studies, I also want to examine the contextual factors that may have influenced these experiences. This poses a dilemma that has produced what I view as clear divisions within the field of Phenomenography.

Developmental Phenomenographers (Bowden, 1995, 2000; Bowden and Green, 2005) have argued for Phenomenography to be undertaken “with the purpose of using the outcomes to help the subjects of the research, usually students or others like them, to learn” (Bowden, 2000:02). However, whilst this aim is not necessarily incommensurate with pure Phenomenography, many

studies that follow a Developmental Phenomenographic paradigm (for example those cited in Bowden & Green, 2005) have used Phenomenographic results, alone, to analyse organisational and social infrastructures. As mentioned in Chapter One, Phenomenography was initially designed to represent, or describe, qualitative variation of the ways in which a phenomenon is experienced but in order to relate variation of experience to the historical, social, and cultural factors that create it, requires additional methodological approaches. In this case, the analysis of the outcome spaces with respect to socio-cultural factors is desirable but I also consider it to be beyond the capabilities of Phenomenographic methodology which is why I aim to use Scandinavian Activity Theory to analyse the organisation and social infrastructures that influence the Phenomenographic research outcomes.

### **3.3 Ontological positioning**

The desire to map variation in experience of study support within one educational establishment poses a number of methodological problems: for example, I have to question whether I, as a researcher, can faithfully capture a series of experiences from the perspective of the 'lifeworld' of others.

Furthermore, I must also consider how I intend to interpret the data and what it means. Such references to methodology, process, and outcomes, inevitably raise questions about the underlying ontology of the methodologies selected, in this case, Phenomenography and Scandinavian Activity Theory.

Whilst Harris (2008:04) expresses concern that "many theoretical aspects of Phenomenography need clarification as most reported studies do not mention the ontological and epistemological assumptions that underpin them", there are a number of authors, notably, and unsurprisingly, Marton, Booth and

Åkerlind, who do address issues of ontology. These authors clearly describe Phenomenography as having a non-dualist ontology with Marton & Booth (1997:122) explaining that the focus on the world as experienced gives Phenomenography a non-dualist ontology in that it takes “neither a positivist/objective approach, independent of human interpretation, nor does it take a subjectivist approach, focusing on internal constructions by the subject”.

This position is cited as a reaction against representational epistemology and dualist ontology; a stand is taken against a focus on the existence of two interrelated but ultimately independent realities; a real world and a representational world (Marton, 1982: 02). However, Richardson (1999) sees the non-dualistic ontology of Phenomenography as problematic as he argues that objects and events exist even if they are not being experienced. This statement misses Marton’s point which is that methodologies that adopt either a solely objectivist, or a solely subjectivist approach, can only partially reveal the world as experienced.

Likewise, Scandinavian Activity Theory develops relational thinking beyond the two dimensions of human and world in that a central focus of Activity Theory is on the social and cultural influences on the relationship between individuals and their environment (Leont’ev, 1978). Thus, an activity is undertaken by a human agent (subject) who is motivated toward the solution of a problem or purpose (object), and mediated by tools (artefacts) in collaboration with others (community). The structure of the activity is constrained by cultural factors including conventions (rules) and social strata (division of labour) within the context. Engeström (1987) and Alsop &

Thompsett (2004) highlight the mediational role of the community and that of social structures to all activity and acknowledge the non-dualistic ontology implied by this. Therefore, both of the methodological choices made for this study reside within a non-dualist ontology.

As the research questions outlined in Chapter One focus, specifically, on the experiences of three communities and on the social and cultural factors that influence these experiences, I maintain that my particular interest mirrors this ontological position; I am interested in an experienced world that “we cannot conceptualise in terms that transcend human ways of making sense of the world” (Marton & Booth, 1997:164), in this way, my intention is to analyse the relationships between participants and phenomena.

### **3.4 Data generation**

This project is based around three sets of interviews. The first of these involved undergraduate students from a variety of disciplines across the university. The second group of interviews involved academic staff from the same disciplines. The final group of interviews involved study support staff currently working with undergraduate students across the university.

#### ***3.4.1. The interview questions:***

Four interview questions were designed for the semi-structured interviews:

##### *Students*

- Can you tell me about an actual, but typical, example of study support that you have experienced?
- What other forms of study support are you aware of?
- Which of these aspects of study support have you accessed, and why?

- How would you define study support?

#### *Staff*

- Can you tell me about an actual, but typical, example of study support that you have enabled?
- What other forms of study support are you aware of?
- Which of these aspects of study support do you encourage students to access, and why?
- How would you define study support?

In all cases, the first question was asked and, each time, this led to discussions about study support which were based around, and dictated, by, participant response. Where this discussion was limited, the second and third questions were posed. The interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim in order to accurately reflect the emotions and emphasis of the participant (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000). Interviewees were then shown their transcribed interview in an attempt to ascertain whether the record represented the 'lifeworld' as experienced by that individual.

#### **3.4.2. Determining the sample**

Whilst some Phenomenographic studies cite smaller sample sizes of between 10 and 15 (Bowden, 1995), a sample of between 15 and 20 is considered to be sufficiently large, without becoming unwieldy, to reveal most of the possible viewpoints and allow a defensible interpretation (Trigwell, 2000).

Disciplines for academic staff and student interviews were identified using Biglan's (1973) pure/applied hard/soft categorisation of disciplines to improve anonymity. From this, the following disciplines were selected:

Pure soft: Psychology, History.

Applied soft: Education, Nursing

Pure hard: Mathematics

Applied Hard: Business Studies (the course closest to Biglan's Applied hard category (i.e. Mechanical, Engineering, Civil Engineering and Economics)).

### *Student sample*

The interviews were conducted with sixteen students at all stages of their undergraduate experiences (at which stage the data appeared 'saturated' in that experiences were being similarly described). The students selected, who were volunteers, represented a wide range of achievement, from those who had attained distinctions for individual module assignments through those who had failed one module or more to those whom had yet to submit a piece of work. Three of the students were diagnosed as having a Specific Learning Difficulty. In addition, the eight male and eight female interview participants represented the range of disciplines identified above, and were aged between 21 and 42. All participants were recruited via open invitation sent out by an administrator and contacted a research assistant to say that they were willing to be interviewed. The use of a research assistant for the student interviews was deemed necessary as the results of a pilot study revealed that students had felt inhibited when interviewed by a tutor. The assistant selected was conversant with Phenomenography.

### *Academic Staff sample*

Once the student sample had been established, members of academic staff were recruited, as before, via open invitation sent out by an administrator and

made contact, by e-mail, to say that they were willing to be interviewed. From 27 responses a sample of 16 academic staff was selected to represent the range of disciplines as identified above and variation in age and length of service. This sample comprised eight male tutors and eight female tutors.

#### *Study support staff sample*

Finally, an open invitation was sent out by an administrator to all study support staff who had not been interviewed as part of the pilot study. From a staff team of 17, four of whom had been interviewed previously, 12 individuals made contact to say that they were willing to be interviewed. This sample covered staff supporting all three academic faculties and included eight females and four males.

During the aforementioned pilot study, academic and study support staff reported that they had not felt inhibited when being interviewed by a tutor so these interviews were conducted by myself. Once all interviews had been conducted a third researcher listened to all tapes to confer parity of approach and questioning style.

### **3.5 Ethical Considerations**

#### **3.5.1. *Micro-ethics***

The following actions were taken to ensure that this study complies with accepted ethical guidelines, as identified by BERA (2004):

- Approval to conduct the research was sought from the Research Ethics Committee at the university under study. This involved the research approach, methodology and sample selection being reviewed by this committee. In addition, ethical approval for this study was granted by Lancaster University.

- Participants were made aware of the nature of the research and the approach taken and informed that their involvement was optional and that they could withdraw their data at any time up until September 2009;
- Strict confidentiality guidelines were maintained, with identification of who would access the raw data and transcript material and information relating to data storage;
- Written consent was provided by the participants prior to commencement of the research.

### **3.5.2. Macro-ethics**

In an attempt to address the concerns of Mauthner et al (2002) that formal principles and guidelines alone are, in themselves, unable to help us deal with ethical problems that inevitably arise when researching human lives and experiences, some analysis of macro-ethical dilemmas is necessary.

In terms of interview technique, Phenomenographic intent to faithfully represent the world as experienced by others has been described, by Brinkmann & Kvale (2005:175), as “the most promising way to deal with ethical issues in qualitative research”. However in making this assertion Brinkmann & Kvale do not seek to minimise the social and political complexity of interviews acknowledging that “even an interview that seeks only to describe the human interactions in qualitative inquiry affects interviewees” (2005:157). In relation to this study the challenges of researching my own practice adds an interesting dimension. In order to examine this dimension further, it is necessary to separate the interview, itself, from the ways in which in which the knowledge produced will circulate in the wider culture.

Consideration of the interviews necessitates examination of power relations

between myself, as researcher, and the interviewees. Whilst the student interviews were conducted by a research assistant, ostensibly to reduce the inhibiting power dynamic between teacher and student, this approach did not diminish the asymmetrical power relation of the interview (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2005) given that the research agenda was set by my own research and knowledge interests and, as a result, became a “one-way instrumental dialogue” (2005:164). Likewise, the staff interviews, whilst offering reduced potential for power influence between researcher and researched, were defined and delineated by myself and, therefore, contextualised by power differences. In particular, colleagues were clearly more aware of the “interviewer’s monopoly of interpretation” (Brinkmann & Kvale 2005:165) than students who appeared to see the interview as emancipatory and as an opportunity for them to voice their feelings. Each of these reactions posed ethical dilemmas. For colleagues, particularly study support staff members, concerns about where the research would be disseminated were paramount; for students, perceived notions of empathy and trust served to create what Kvale termed “a fantasy of democratic relations” (2006:482) that, potentially, rendered the interviewees as vulnerable to manipulation. It would be disingenuous to suggest that such ethical dilemmas are easily overcome; however, attempts to reduce their impact were made. In terms of staff concerns, whilst running the risk of tempering responses, it was made clear from the outset that the research would be disseminated within, and beyond, the university and that I hoped to publish articles from the thesis. Similarly, students were made aware that I was not in a position to change or influence practice and that results would be disseminated within, and beyond, the

university.

### **3.6 Phenomenographic data interpretation.**

Phenomenographers hold that irrespective of the nature of the phenomenon there are always a limited number of ways in which the phenomenon is experienced (Dall'Alba & Walsh, 1989; Marton, 1994). The range of ways that people experience these phenomena have been referred to as 'conceptions' (Marton, 1981), or 'understandings' (Sandberg, 2000), with Marton & Pong, in 2005, acknowledging that:

"a conception...has been called various names, such as 'ways of conceptualising', 'ways of experiencing', ways of seeing', 'ways of apprehending', 'ways of understanding and so on" (2005: 336).

Whilst Marton & Pong acknowledge, in the same paper, that 'conceptualising is not identical with 'experiencing' they justify this conflation of terms by stating that the "reason for using so many different synonyms is that although none of them corresponds completely to what we have in mind, they all do to a certain extent". (Marton & Pong, 2005:336). This argument poses some difficulty for me as I, like many others, believe that "experience of a phenomenon may be crucially different from understanding of a phenomenon" (Dahlin, 2007:332) as experiences "consist mainly of perceptual judgements" whereas descriptions of understanding "also involve conceptual judgements and theoretical propositions" (Dahlin, 2007: 332). As such, my primary aim in this study is only to make variation of *experience* visible and I do not equate this with variation of understanding.

Such variation of experience is presented, in Phenomenographic studies, as 'categories of description' (Marton, 1981; Sandberg, 1997) which form the basis for the development of a hierarchy of ways of experiencing, known as

the 'outcome space' (Marton, 1994). As such, the outcome space of a Phenomenographic study contains a set of hierarchically structured categories of description concerning the phenomenon under study (Järvinen 2004). Therefore, this study commits to the use of a Phenomenographic research methodology for the purposes of establishing the qualitatively different ways that people experience study support; using Phenomenography as a research specialism which focuses on human experience (Pramling, 1994) rather than on human behaviour or mental states (Marton & Booth, 1997). Nevertheless, I will draw upon the writing of those who have chosen to examine 'conceptions' and 'understandings' as far as their work aligns with my own focus on 'experiences'.

### **3.6.1. The object and outcomes of Phenomenographic research**

The outcome space of a Phenomenographic study contains a set of hierarchically structured categories of description concerning the phenomenon under study (Järvinen, 2004) and the categories of description for this study have been determined by my analysis of the individuals' accounts of their experience of study support. Marton and Booth (1997:111) suggest that categories of description should meet three criteria:

- Each category should describe a different component of the phenomenon;
- Each category should be logically related and represented hierarchically;

and

- the outcome space should be made up of the minimum number of different categories that describe variation across the sample.

As I am exploring variation of experience across three participant groups, I find these criteria helpful insofar as they encourage clear coding of a large amount of data. For instance, the first criterion forces me to justify how, and why, I consider certain experiences to be a particular component of study support. Furthermore, the fact that each category should be logically and hierarchically represented creates a useful resonance with the way in which I have structured the literature themes using Lea and Street's (1998) hierarchically inclusive model of student writing.

The next stage of Phenomenography involves redefining each category in the outcome space in terms of structural and referential components. In truth, at least as many phenomenographic studies omit this stage as include it, however, as the structural aspects of a category refer to "the combination of features discerned and focussed upon by the subject" (Marton & Pong, 2005:336) and the referential aspects of a category "the particular meaning of an individual object; anything delimited and attended to by subjects" (ibid, 2005:336) I consider this stage to be crucial. Indeed, as I intend to examine the historical, social and material factors that influence experiences, some notion of what is foregrounded in each experience and the assumptions implied by experiences will be central to the Activity Theory analysis.

### **3.6.2. Assumptions of Phenomenography**

The literature around Phenomenography discusses the following methodological assumptions that are worthy of consideration here:

- That the interview participants think about their experiences and that the way that an individual recalls an experience is a combined product of the individual, the experience and the surrounding environment; none of these

factors can be viewed in isolation of the others (Bowden & Walsh, 1994; Åkerlind, 2002).

- That what someone has experienced is accessible, either through language or other methods (Säljö, 1988).
- That there is a limited number of ways a group of people can experience a given phenomenon (Marton 1986; Marton & Booth, 1997; Bowden, 2005).
- That it is possible to 'bracket' when analysing data. (Marton, 1994; Ashworth & Lucas, 1998).

By undertaking a Phenomenographic study I am both committed to, and challenged by, such assumptions.

The first assumption - that interview participants think about their experiences and that such conceptions are a combined product of the individual, the experience and the surrounding environment - is paradoxical. On the one hand, having adopted a non-dualist ontology it would be difficult to see conceptions as anything but a combined product of the individual, the experience and the surrounding environment. However, the assumption that interview participants think about their experiences presents a greater challenge. Firstly it requires some understanding of what it is to think about an experience and whether thinking about a past experience, in any detail, alters the memory of that experience. In this way, such an assumption requires some recognition of what it is that we capture when we ask individuals to recall such experiences and whether the authenticity of the experience is lost in articulation. Thus, I would argue that it is essential for me to realise that the

Phenomenographic interview will not only capture variation in experience of a phenomenon, but also, variation in intuition, insight and ways of thinking.

Similarly, the second assumption - that a person's experiences are accessible, either through language or other methods – compels me to realise that the data set will demonstrate variability in capacity to articulate experience as much as it demonstrates variation of experience itself. However, if it can be argued that communicative action is the process through which people form their identities (Habermas, 1981) then one might also reasonably assume that a person's view of their 'lifeworld' can be mediated through language. This poses an interesting dilemma that, arguably, goes beyond the concerns expressed by Säljö. As Phenomenography is almost always conducted via semi-structured interviews, it excludes those sectors of society that are unable to articulate experience. This may indicate that Phenomenography has a recognisably variable ability to capture experience according to group and context.

The third assumption - that there is a limited number of ways in which a given phenomenon can be experienced - appears to be fairly plausible.

Nevertheless, the growing practice of creating outcome spaces that represent between four and eight concepts (Marton, 1986; Marton & Booth, 1997; Åkerlind, 2002, 2005; Ashwin, 2005; Bowden, 2005) could serve to undermine the authenticity of the outcome space as the true representation of the limited ways in which a particular phenomenon is experienced. I wonder whether some consideration of what is meant by the term 'limited', and why, is necessary if Phenomenography is to retain methodological credibility. In

response to this concern, I have elected to be more explicit about my methods of category construction in order to avoid the temptation of 'creating' between four and eight categories.

The fourth assumption - that it is possible to 'bracket' when analysing data –is seen as problematic by those beyond the Phenomenographic community. For many researchers, the desire, or ability, to 'bracket' earlier research findings, other evidence from apparently authoritative sources, the prior construction of hypotheses or questions of 'cause' (Ashworth & Lucas, 1998) would seem unrealistic. Nevertheless, it is argued, in Phenomenography, that the bracketing process does not require the researcher to deny prior knowledge, but that it is designed to ensure that such knowledge, or, indeed, any previously constructed hypotheses, should not influence the creation of categories of description (Ashworth & Lucas, 1998). However, Uljens (1996) argues that this is not possible because an empirical study is framed by the guiding role of prior theory and the knowledge interest of a specific study. Nevertheless, and more usefully in my opinion, Uljens also argues that this should not be taken to mean that prior theory determines what interpretation will be reached, just that 'bracketing' is a contested concept. As such for the purposes of this study, I am asserting that my own prior knowledge or interest in study support does not prevent me from being open-minded when gathering and analysing data. Indeed, as we normally "possess the ability to consciously suspend our personal understanding of a subject matter in order to understand somebody else's perspective" (Uljens, 1996: 143) the concept of 'bracketing' can be translated as a willingness to attempt to avoid prejudging data; arguably the aim of many researchers.

### **3.6.3. The Phenomenographic Analysis.**

In Phenomenographic studies, data analysis usually involves an initial search for variation across the interview transcripts and a subsequent identification of structural relationships between the findings. Ashworth and Lucas (2000) have identified the differing approaches to the early stages of Phenomenographic analysis, suggesting that some researchers caution against an early focus on identifying structural relationships, as this may impact on the researcher's capacity to maintain neutrality. Instead they argue that the early stages of transcript reading should involve openness, and that only at subsequent readings should there be a focus on relationships. Being new to Phenomenography I felt it prudent to avoid the temptation to define structural relationships before establishing the variation across each group as demonstrated in the worked example that follows. As such, the analytical approach that I adopted was iterative and involved the continual sorting and comparing of data for the purposes of establishing categories of description. A primary feature of this process is the search for differences between categories (Åkerlind 2002). As, Marton and Booth (1997:133) argue:

'All of the material that has been collected forms a pool of meaning. It contains all that the researcher can hope to find, and the researcher's task is simply to find it. This is achieved by applying the principle of focusing on one aspect of the object and seeking its dimensions of variation while holding other aspects frozen.'

In addition, there is variation in the amount of transcript considered at one time by different phenomenographic researchers; strategies range from considering the whole transcript (Åkerlind, 2008), or segments of each transcript (Andretta, 2007) to the initial selection of even smaller quotations (Svennson & Theman, 1983). The approach taken in this study was to consider the whole transcript

initially, in order to establish interrelated themes and meanings between transcripts, and then to subsequently consider the transcript in chunks and select excerpts that exemplify variation across categories. From this, structural and referential components were discerned to enable reorganisation of the outcome spaces.

#### **3.6.4. Worked example**

##### *Stage 1: consideration of transcripts.*

The first phase of data organisation was to read, and re-read, each set of transcripts to ensure that individual experiences were understood in terms of their overall meaning (Marton & Pong, 2005). As each set of interviews were specific to a particular community (i.e. students, academic staff or study support staff) I chose to read transcripts within a community several times before reading those from other communities. This aspect of data interpretation lasted for approximately six weeks.

##### *Stage 2: Identifying types of experience.*

Following consideration of transcripts as a whole, transcripts were marked, and segmented, according to themes addressed (Marton & Pong, 2005). Across the student transcripts quotation segments typically represented a range of experiences from those that described an actual, by typical, experience of study support as:

##### **Segment # 1**

“It’s good to get referencing advice from the study support people as tutors get really het up when you don’t reference properly. Once you’ve been a few times and got it into your head you get used to how to reference and can do it automatically.”

to those that described an actual, but typical, experience of study support as:

### Segment # 2

“If we never move beyond our gut reaction, which seems to be the way our media operates, then we have only scratched the surface of our understanding before we’re onto the next topic. Study support, for me, is those things such as when we develop a debate across a week, or even two weeks, others are bound to interrogate our thinking and we have to justify it. I think that’s the most useful activity we can do here.”

This aspect of data interpretation lasted for approximately eight weeks.

### *Stage 3: From experience to category of description.*

Once experiences had been identified, and segmented, the segments for each community were examined in order to create categories of description.

Following the criteria for creating categories of description identified by Marton and Booth (1997:111); that each category should describe a different component of the phenomenon and that each category should be logically related and represented hierarchically, four categories of description were identified across the student community. These are represented in the outcome space, below with category 1 broadly representing the first segment, above, and category 3 broadly representing segment # 2.

### *Stage 4: Creating, and testing, the outcome space.*

The outcome space has been described as hierarchically constructed with hierarchies being defined “in terms of inclusive progressions in the sense that from a higher dimension you can ‘look at’ and reflect upon a lower one, but not the other way around” (Dahlin, 2007:335). Therefore, several outcome spaces were drafted, and tested, against this hierarchical inclusivity and also against the extent to which it solely represented the variation of experience as

evidenced in the data. The resulting outcome space for the student community is represented below.

1	Input from study support staff on technical aspects of academic writing.
2	Support from academic staff exploring assessment tasks in order to improve grades.
3	Seminar tasks (including those facilitated by the use of a virtual learning environment) that explicitly develop aspects of 'study' such as critical thinking, which may, or may not, link to the formal assessment.
4	Reflective, analytical, debates, both formal and informal, that allow opportunities to express a viewpoint and critique the viewpoints of others, within a particular academic discipline.

This process of drafting, and re-drafting, outcome spaces lasted for approximately 12 weeks.

*Stage 5: Identifying structural and referential components of the outcome space.*

Whilst Marton (1994) has described the structural components of categories of description as the internal and external horizons of the subject's boundaries of awareness, Andretta (2007:156) interprets awareness as "the person's total experience of the world at a given point in time rather than as a dichotomy of conscious and subconscious state" invoking a relationship of constant variation between things in the foreground of awareness and those in the background. Thus from the outcome space above, I interpret categories one and two as 'foregrounding' deficit notions of learners in need of experiences that fill gaps and 'backgrounding' the potential of students. Conversely, experiences three and four, in my opinion, 'foreground' potential and

background perceived deficits. In terms of referential dimension, as being “the particular meaning of an individual object; anything delimited and attended to by subjects” (Marton & Pong, 2005:336), I have interpreted a referential hierarchy from experiences that focus upon skills through those that focus on learners to those that have an academic community focus. Defining the referential and structural components of the outcome spaces proved to be the most contentious aspect of data analysis producing the most discussion, and debate, when presented at educational conferences or to other Phenomenographic researchers. The structural and referential dimensions described above were the third version of these concepts and emerged from much discussion, reflection and debate. This aspect of data analysis lasted for approximately 16 weeks.

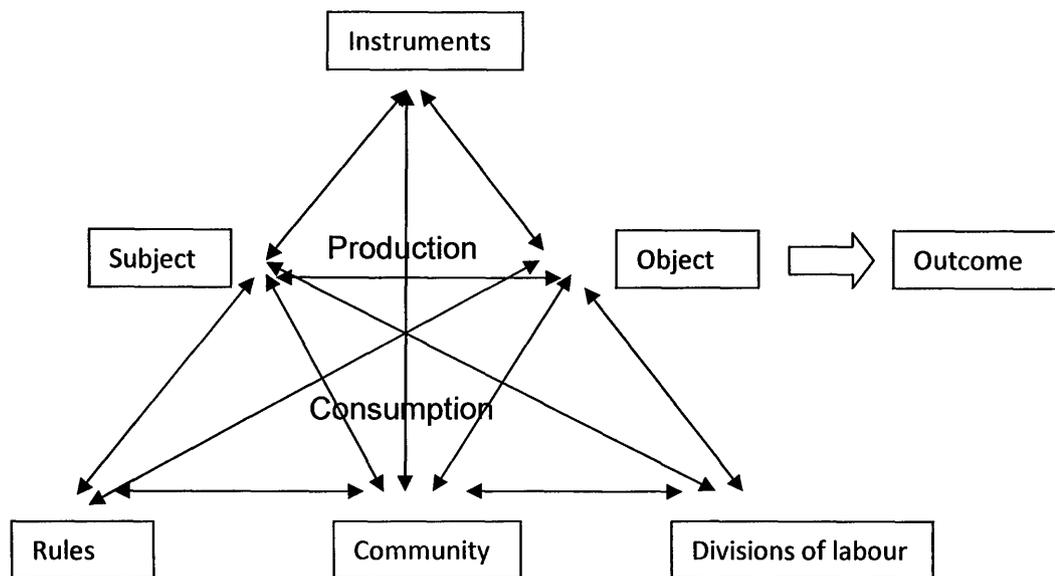
### **3.7 Scandinavian Activity Theory: a heuristic device.**

As mentioned in Chapter One, Scandinavian Activity Theory is a derivation of Soviet Activity Theory which was rooted in the work of Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky meaning that Soviet Activity Theory is based within a psychological ontology the use of which might create internal ontological conflict with the non-dualist ontology inherent in Phenomenography. For instance, beliefs about our existentiality and forfeiture to the world (Heidegger, 1962) from a psychological perspective bear little resemblance to the way in which existentiality and forfeiture to the world would be viewed from a non-dualist perspective. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, I intend to use the version of Activity Theory sometimes known as Scandinavian Activity Theory based on the work of Yrjö Engeström.

Scandinavian Activity Theory (hereafter referred to as Activity Theory) aims to explain how social artefacts and social organisation mediate social action.

(Engeström, 1987) as illustrated in figure 3.1.

Fig 3.1: The structure of human activity (Engeström, 1987:78)



Engeström describes this activity as follows:

“the ‘subject’ refers to the individual whose agency is chosen as the point of view in the analysis, the object refers to the ‘problem space’ at which the activity is directed and which is moulded and transformed into outcomes with the help of physical and symbolic, external and internal mediating instruments. The community comprises multiple individuals who share the same general object and who construct themselves as distinct from other communities. The division of labour refers to both the horizontal division of tasks between the members of the community and to the vertical division of power and status. Finally the rules refer to the explicit and implicit regulations, norms and conventions that constrain actions and interactions within the activity system.” (Engeström, 1987: 78)

In this instance, I aim to analyse the experience of study support (object) as articulated by research participants (subjects) from a range of faculties

(communities) in one university. The power relations within, and between, the groups of research participants are defined by a series of 'rules' and by 'divisions of labour'.

A further facet of Activity Theory relates to the belief that individuals do not have a direct and uninterpreted acquisition to their environment and that "the relation between individuals and environment is considered mediated, established and developed through *physical* and *intellectual* tools" (Säljö, 2000:81).

However, the term 'tools' is acknowledged by many, (Bakhurst, 1997; Cole, 1996; Engeström, 2001; Ashwin 2009) as limiting and the increasingly popular term 'mediating artefact' will be used in this study to recognise that:

"the artefact bears a certain significance which it possesses, not by virtue of its physical nature, but because it has been produced for a certain use and incorporated into a system of human ends and purposes. The object thus confronts us as an embodiment of meaning, placed and sustained in it by 'aimed-oriented' human activity" (Bakhurst, 1995: 160).

Put simply, artefacts refer to items created or resulting from human action and activity, (i.e. an object of culture) and the tools are merely the means to create it (Dias-Kommonen, 2004).

Interestingly, the object and outcome are kept separate within the framework of Activity Theory. Thus, in this study, the outcome of study support mechanisms can be described via interview, but what is less clear, and what the framework of Activity Theory may help me to identify, is the diverse and perhaps contradicting *object aims* of the activity; that is the motivation that each participant has for engaging with the object of activity.

In addition, Activity Theory recognises that in any complex social system there will be competing goals, limited resources, differing values, and a variety of

desired outcomes; as such, actions are not fully predictable or rational and the most well-planned and streamlined actions involve failures, disruptions, and unexpected innovations. Such conflicting forces within activities have been termed 'contradictions' (Engeström, 1999:32).

Given that Ashwin (2009:58), and others, point out that:

“Within higher education it is not clear that students and academics have the same 'object' in teaching-learning interactions, that they are subject to the same rules or that their activities are carried out in relation to the same 'community'”

I do not intend to create a single activity system diagram to represent all perspectives in this study; instead, I intend to create an activity system for each participant group and then use these models to investigate internal contradictions within each system and quaternary contradictions (Engeström, 2001), where one activity system interacts with, and is influenced by, another.

### **3.7.1. Activity system contradictions**

#### **3.7.1.1. Internal contradictions**

The activity systems modelled for this study will contain a variety of different viewpoints or "voices", as well as layers of historically accumulated artefacts, rules, and patterns of division of labour. The multi-voiced nature of activity systems, Engeström (1996) stresses, is both a resource for collective achievement and a source of conflict. As such, Engeström, (1987) maintains that a conceptual model of an activity system is particularly useful when one wants to make sense of systemic factors behind seemingly individual and accidental disturbances, or inner contradictions, occurring in daily practice.

These contradictions can be interpreted, by examining what Roth and Tobin (2002:116) describe as an "ethnography of trouble" which, in this instance, will be interpreted from the interview transcripts.

This feature of Activity Theory is particularly useful in terms of this study as, for instance, a contradiction may appear when a new object aim, such as the planning of learner focussed study support, emerges in a tutor's daily practice. In response to this tutors might feel the need to expand their collaboration but colleagues may resist this. Such resistance might produce conflicts between the object aim of learner focussed study support and the traditional rules and community of teaching. In this way, exploration of the potential for internal contradictions across participant groups will, hopefully, reveal the historical, social and material factors that create unintended experiences.

### ***3.7.1.2. Quaternary contradictions.***

It has been argued (Engeström, 1996) that a focus on multiple, interrelated activity systems, and the contradictions that emerge between activity systems, may be seen as an outcome of how the tradition was taken up and re-contextualised in the west. As activity studies were largely limited to play and learning among children in its initial context, in the former Soviet Union, contradictions of activity remained a contentious issue. With altered contexts, and a resulting change in focus towards multiple, interrelated activity systems, Scandinavian Activity Theory became more sensitive toward cultural diversity with quaternary contradictions (Engeström, 2001), acknowledging boundary crossings and contradictions between systems as challenging, but at the same time driving factors of activity. This distinction confirms my specific choice of Scandinavian Activity Theory over more generalised versions of this methodology.

Indeed, the primary motivation for looking at quaternary contradictions stems from a desire to “acquire new ways of working collaboratively” (Engeström

2001:139), and to develop concepts and tools to account for “dialogue, multiple perspectives and networks of these intersecting systems” (Engeström 2001:135). As I intend to use this study to generate discussion around the ways in which study support is conceptualised in the university under study, my own university, I believe that an examination of how students, tutors and study support staff interact, and why, will contribute much to the debate.

Multi-voicedness, as a concept, refers to the multiple points of view, traditions and interests represented by the community present in an activity system and derives from the participants’ “diverging divisions of labour, histories, artefacts, rules and conventions” Engeström (2001:136). As such, multi-voicedness is a necessary feature of the examination of quaternary contradictions and, pertinently, multi-voicedness has been described as a source of trouble and a source of innovation and according to Engeström (2001:136) demands translation and negotiation. I intend to attempt to understand, and possibly translate, the multiple perspectives gathered in the Phenomenographic interviews via Activity Theory analysis of the results. In order to achieve this, the interview transcripts will be reviewed to reveal tensions between activity systems; in each case I intend to select those concerns expressed most frequently across the whole interview sample. The advantage of this approach, as I see it, is to navigate the points raised by Ashwin (2009) relating to the positioning of the ‘subject’ in Activity Theory analysis. Specifically, Ashwin argues that:

“If Activity Theory focuses on the activity systems of individuals it loses its sense of a collective engagement.....however, if it focuses, for example, on collective activity systems then it is not clear how students with different learning objects can be incorporated into the same activity system.” (2009: 68)

By examining frequently cited examples of concerns raised I hope that the resultant analysis will go some way to representing collective activity by focussing on widespread, but individually expressed, concerns.

Therefore, by examining internal and quaternary contradictions, I intend to address the second and third research questions of this study. Specifically, I hope to analyse the historical, social and material factors that influence experiences by examining internal contradictions within activity systems and then I intend to examine how these socio-cultural factors impact on interactions between each group by exploring quaternary contradictions. In this way, I can move beyond variation in order to examine the ways in which social and organisational infrastructures have contributed to this variation.

### **3.7.2. Second phase data analysis – (Scandinavian) Activity Theory.**

The second phase of data analysis, therefore, involved the analysis of outcomes spaces via the use of Activity Theory. As mentioned, Activity Theory focuses on the broader contextual framework of activity. Arnseth (2008) uses a hunter metaphor to explore this distinction describing not only the significance of mediating artefacts, such as spears and arrows, directed at an object but also the centrality of divisions of labour and historically developed rules. This emphasis, introduced by Engeström, is characterised by the aforementioned contradictions exemplified by Arnseth (2008: 293) within the context of the hunting metaphor as:

“The fact that a community might use animal skins as exchange for other goods from a neighbouring tribe for instance, might create disturbances and changes in the activity system, e.g. that new trade professions emerge, causing new divisions of labour, new rules for sharing profits and perhaps also changes in the activity of hunting. It might also change the object so that hunting is done in order to gain animal skins and not food, something that

constitutes the exchange value of the game as the primary motive driving the activity. In a sense this rather simplistic example constitutes the historical genesis of the emergence of complex societies made up of several intersecting activity systems.”

For the purposes of this study, the data has been analysed with respect to the contradictions that emerge within a complex university society made up of several interacting systems. Nevertheless, it is worth noting here that whilst Engeström has focussed, of late, of secondary contradictions in terms of developmental transformations (2005:180) I intend, for the purposes of this study, to focus on internal contradictions within each Activity System, in the first instance and then quaternary contradictions (Engeström, 2001) produced when one activity system interacts with, and is influenced by, another. In this way, the analysis that follows does not seek to transform practice, rather it seeks to present interpretations that can be used by stakeholders in a facilitatory dialogue. Avis (2007:165) describes such a dialogue as one that:

“effectively reviews institutional processes, seeking to uncover disruptions, contradictions and difficulties that necessitate change in institutional or cross-institutional practices, in other words change in an activity system or cluster of systems”.

The benefit of this theoretical frame is that it views activity as “historically conditioned systems of relations among individuals and their proximal, culturally organised environments” (Engeström, 1999:12). This concept offers a way of thinking about links between what individuals do and why, the resources they draw upon, and the communities in which they are situated, providing a perspective on the complexity of relationships in which activities are embedded (Hopwood & Stocks, 2008) whilst at the same time recognising that “with the passage of time internal anomalies and contradictions in activity

systems can become an everyday taken-for-granted feature of life within them” (Blackler, 1993: 871).

### **3.7.3. Scalar analysis as a further research technique**

As I am interested in relative power dynamics between interacting activity systems and Activity Theory does not extend to such analysis, I intend to employ Scalar Analysis, a technique used in Physics, to achieve this aim. I am not aware of this technique having been used in Activity Theory research before, and, as such, aim to briefly explore the potential of Scalar Analysis here.

In simple terms, Scalar Analysis is a technique used to represent the size (but not the direction) of a physical entity (for example mass or temperature).

There are many examples of the ways in which this aids analysis, for instance, Hur et al (2002) use Scalar Analysis to model eddy currents in three dimensions and analyse their characteristics. For the purposes of this study, complex applications from the world of Physics are less important than the ways in which basic Scalar Analysis techniques might usefully be applied to interactions between activity systems. As such, I am using the simple definition of the term ‘scalar’ as any quantity that only has magnitude as opposed to both magnitude and direction. To illustrate; ‘speed’ is a scalar quantity, having only magnitude, while ‘velocity’ is used to denote both the speed and the direction of the motion and is thus a vector quantity.

For the purposes of this study, I am treating the power held by participant groups as a scalar quantity in order to model relative degrees of power held by participant groups without attempting to suggest that this power is directed at any other particular group. This does not deny that power, or powerlessness,

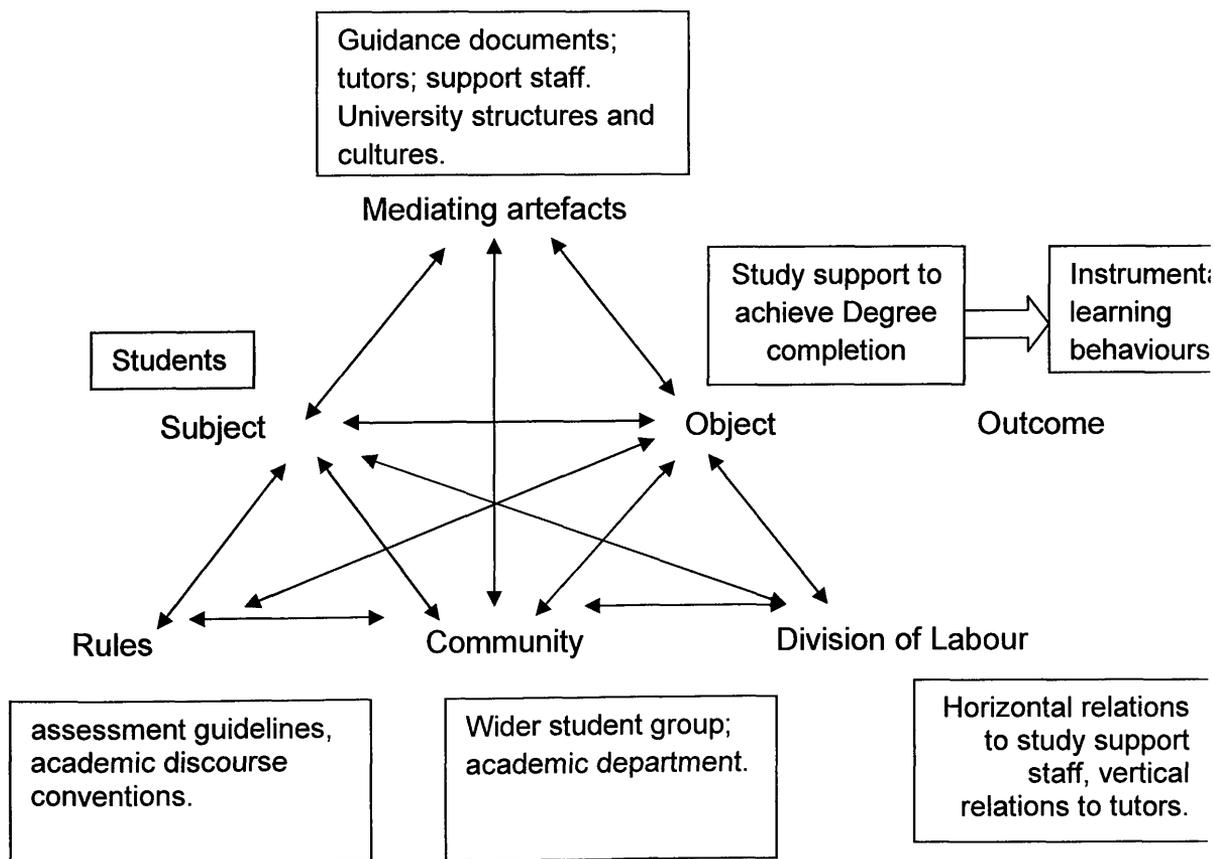
is not felt by interacting groups, merely to suggest that I cannot be sure whether power, in this instance, is intentionally exerted by one group over another.

### 3.7.4. Activity Theory Analysis and Scalar Analysis – worked example.

#### Stage 1: Defining Activity Systems.

The first stage of Activity Theory analysis involves the identification of activity systems and their component ‘nodes’. As an example, a student activity system has been modelled, in fig 3.2 below, and the nodes relating to: mediating artefacts, object, outcome, division on labour, community and rules have been identified based upon the student interviews.

Fig 3.2 The student experience of study support as an activity system (after Engeström, 1987)



This stage of the Activity Theory analysis required re-examination of the interview transcripts with a focus on commonality rather than variation. The interview transcripts for each participant group were studied separately in order to develop three distinct activity systems and this aspect of data interpretation / modelling lasted for approximately eight weeks.

*Stage 2: Identifying internal contradictions.*

Once each activity system had been modelled, review of the interview transcripts enabled analysis of internal contradictions within each system. For example, concerns raised by students typically related to a perceived mismatch between their learning needs and the forms of academic support on offer:

Student 5 (applied soft)

“Well, I think the tutors are best qualified to support our studies so I don’t know why they send us off to study support.”

Whilst a purely phenomenographic study does not highlight such tensions, part of the value of Activity Theory lies in its capacity to:

“ help bring such tensions to the foreground and to provide a language and conceptual framework for describing their locus in systems of activity.”  
(Hopwood & Stocks, 2008)

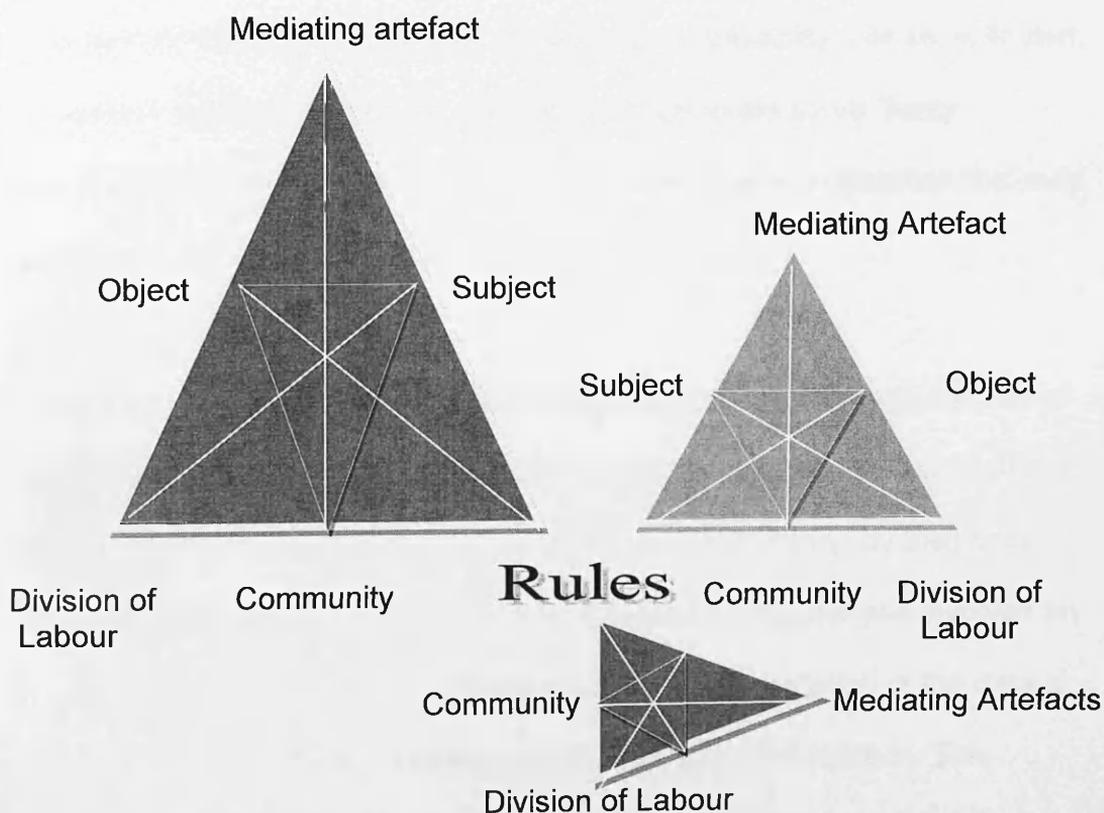
For the purposes of this study, the most commonly cited tensions for each participant group were analysed. This aspect of data interpretation lasted for approximately six weeks.

*Stage 3: Analysing interacting Activity systems.*

Following the aforementioned analysis of internal contradictions, generic examples of concerns or tensions experienced about activity beyond the immediate activity system were identified for each participant group.

For example, the most common concerns expressed by students relate to the historical development of rules, and practices, in the higher education institution under study. An exploration of comments made in relation to the historical development of rules by each of the other participant group allowed quaternary contradictions (Engeström, 2001) to be identified. In addition, Scalar analysis was used to model power differentials between interacting systems (see fig 3.3 below). In order to clarify the distinction between the three systems, the academic staff activity triangle is blue, the student activity triangle is green and the triangle to represent study support staff is brown

Fig 3.3 Interacting Activity Systems.



This aspect of analysis lasted for approximately 12 weeks.

### 3.8. Questions of Generalisability, Validity and Reliability of Results

### **3.8.1. Generalisability**

As generalisability is regarded as the extent to which the research findings can be replicated (Kvale, 2008), Marton and Booth (1997) suggest that the results of Phenomenographic research should be generalisable to similar populations as variation within the sample is likely to reflect variation in the wider population and therefore the range of perspectives are likely to represent the range of perspectives across the population. However, I have chosen to augment Phenomenography with Activity Theory as I believe that the particular historical, social and cultural context of each university defines the experiences of students and staff. As such, generalisability, per se, is limited, however, I do intend, within my discussion, to generate some “fuzzy generalisabilities” (Bassegy, 1999) about the phenomena in question that may relate to similar contexts.

### **3.8.2. Reliability**

Kvale (2008) suggests that research reliability is ensured through the use of appropriate methodological procedures to achieve consistency and quality in data interpretations. Phenomenography and Activity Theory, by their very nature, make this replicability problematic because data analysis involves an intersubjective approach where the researcher’s interpretation of the data is determined by her/his own background and unique interpretation. This therefore limits the reliability of the results (Booth 1992).

Kvale (2008) however, also argues that, in such cases, research reliability is enhanced through the use of several researchers to analyse the data. In Phenomenography, Sandberg (1997: 205) describes this approach as

'interjudge reliability', where reliability is determined by the extent to which other researchers are able to recognise the conceptions and categories determined by the first researcher. Additionally, Säljö (1997) asserts that an 80% to 90% agreement on categories of description between researchers is an appropriate level. Such an approach has been used in this study facilitated by the doctoral supervision framework. I have been responsible for initially analysing data and developing categories, or Activity Theory models, after which, through discussion with a supervisor experienced in Phenomenography and Activity Theory, categories of description and activity systems were confirmed and adopted.

Furthermore, in this study, an additional reliability check has been attempted via the use of 'worked examples' designed to illustrate the interpretative steps taken, thus highlighting my perspective and considerations at each stage of the research process.

### **3.8.3. Validity**

Validity in qualitative studies refers to the degree to which the research findings are reflective of the phenomenon under investigation (Åkerlind 2002). The Phenomenographic researcher is therefore cautioned to ensure that the sample is appropriate, interview questions are non-leading and data analysis is undertaken following pre-established guidelines (Sandberg 1997; Ashworth and Lucas 2000). The validity of the Phenomenographic research approach is identified in the researcher's ability to justify and defend the outcome space and result findings (Booth 1992); justification can thus be illustrated via a transparent and open presentation of research method and findings. Kvale (2008) suggests that there are two types of validity measures that are

appropriate for Phenomenographic research - communicative and pragmatic validity checks. I consider both of these types of validity measure to be equally suitable for Activity Theory analysis as the validity concerns that relate to Activity Theory are similar to those that relate to Phenomenography; namely that the researcher must be able to defend the degree to which the research findings are reflective of the phenomenon under investigation.

### **3.8.3.1. Communicative validity checks**

Communicative validity checks require the researcher to convincingly argue her own interpretation and rationale, as a means of gaining agreement between themselves and others exposed to the research (Sandberg, 1997; Marton and Booth 1997; Kvale 2008). This study, as already described, involved supervisor review of outcome space and activity system construction and both aspects of analysis (Phenomenographic and Activity Theory) were presented, and therefore interrogated, at the European Conference for Educational Research.

### **3.8.3.2. Pragmatic validity checks**

Kvale (2008) and Sandberg (1997) argue that research outcomes can also be evaluated in terms of their usefulness to the group under study. A further check is in the acceptance of the research findings by the intended audience (Uljens 1996). Åkerlind (2002) argues that if the study is considered useful, and has findings that can be applied to the particular situation under investigation, then it meets the pragmatic validity check. The results, and interpretation, of this study have been presented at internal Research Exchange events to all three participant groups. At each event the participant

group involved identified themselves within the research and confirmed it to be representative of their experience of the phenomenon under study.

Finally, Cope (2002:19) suggests the following guidelines for increasing validity:

- the researcher's own background and understanding of the phenomenon in question should be identified;
- the characteristics of the research participants should be noted so that the generalisability potential is more clearly understood;
- the interview question design should be justified;
- the steps taken to collect data should be transparent;
- the data analysis methods should be outlined;
- the processes for arriving at categories should be identified; and
- the results should be presented in a manner that allows for scrutiny.

These guidelines were used to shape this study.

### **3.9 Conclusions.**

The methodological approaches taken in this study are non-dualist in ontology and have been designed to address the research questions outlined in Chapter One.

A Phenomenographic approach has been selected to ascertain the qualitatively different ways in which students, tutors and study support staff experience study support in the university under study. From this, Scandinavian Activity Theory has been chosen to understand the historical, social and material factors that influence these experiences and Scalar Analysis has been employed to model power differentials between each group.



## **Chapter Four: Phenomenographic Results**

### **4.1 Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to present and analyse the qualitative variations in the ways in which each group experience study support. As discussed, in the previous chapter, within Phenomenography the data is presented as an 'outcome space' which represents my understanding of the qualitative variation across each data set. The hierarchical structure of the outcome space, that is the nature of the way in which each category differs from the one preceding it, will be explored with reference to specific quotations from the interviews. However, it must be noted that quotations do not represent interviewees within a given 'category', rather the "spirit" (Trigwell, 2000:78) of individual quotations are used in this chapter to evidence the ways in which I understood variation across the data; as such, individual interviewees may have described experiences that contributed to the formation of more than one category. What follows is an exposition of my understanding of the full range of variation across all interviews within each group.

From this exploration of the hierarchical nature of each outcome space the categories of description have been reformed into a second outcome space which explores the structural and referential components of the categories.

The first set of results relates to the student data, the second to that of academic staff and the third to that of study support staff.

## 4.2 Student results

A total of 16 student interviews produced the following outcome space.

*Table 4.1 Student Outcome Space*

1	Input from study support staff on technical aspects of academic writing.
2	Support from academic staff exploring assessment tasks in order to improve grades.
3	Seminar tasks (including those facilitated by the use of a virtual learning environment) that explicitly develop aspects of 'study' such as critical thinking, which may, or may not, link to the formal assessment.
4	Reflective, analytical, debates, both formal and informal, that allow opportunities to express a viewpoint and critique the viewpoints of others, within a particular academic discipline.

### **4.2.1. Category 1: Input from study support staff on technical aspects of academic writing.**

Interviews that aligned with this category defined study support as instruction in the technical aspects of assignment writing to ameliorate a perceived student deficit. In these interviews students appeared to see this form of study support as generic and skills based rather than one that responded to their individual needs as a learner or that sought to enable enculturation within a specific discipline or community. This is illustrated by the quotation below:

Student 2 (pure soft)

"It's good to go to the referencing sessions as tutors get really het up when you don't reference properly. It would be nice, though, to have individual support with the actual mistakes that *you* make so that you don't have to listen to things that you might not need."

*Interviewer: What do you mean?*

Student 2 (pure soft)

“Well I guess you can get 1:1 but that’s only if you have special needs, I think, Dyslexia or something like that. The general stuff about how to reference and things like that is the same session for everyone and you have to sit through a list of tips.”

The spirit of this quotation exemplifies a form of study support that focuses on skills to be delivered via generic sessions. This student clearly felt overlooked as an individual learner, with particular needs, but had interpreted 1:1 study sessions as being aimed at learners with specific additional needs.

Interestingly, this quotation describes study support in terms of a process predicated on perceived deficit that seeks to correct “mistakes” rather than one which aims to develop student potential.

Likewise, other comments that aligned with this category recounted experiences that addressed what were often described as “academic writing techniques” with a clear presumption of student deficit.

Student 9 (pure hard)

“Another session I had was when I went to a session about assignment planning. We keep being told that we need to go to these sessions as we don’t have the right skills and we all keep making the same mistakes. It was quite useful, although a lot of the stuff wasn’t really relevant for me. I mean, they went through a whole lot of things that I didn’t really need, like having a central idea, which I thought was fairly obvious. Although some people were writing it all down so I guess they have to cover everything, just to be sure. I passed that one so didn’t have to go back.”

I interpret this quotation as exemplifying acceptance of a notion that all students require a set of generic skills. Whilst unsurprising, on the one hand, given the generic nature of higher education assessment criteria designed by

a central body, the underlying tension apparent in the first example was mirrored here. Resistance to being instructed in skills already acquired, based upon a clear assumption of wholesale need, is evident.

Overall, the language used in responses that align with this category of description emphasises skills or techniques and locates the deficit within the learner. In some cases students objected to the narrow skill focus:

Student 14 (applied hard)

“I know there are lots of ‘how to’ sessions but they’re not very sophisticated. It would be nice to have a session on ‘why I think differently to you’ rather than ‘how to construct a sentence.’”

And in others the student, themselves, appeared, to hold a skill based focus:

Student 1 (pure soft)

“Study support has to be about skills, all the things we need to know in order to pass.”

Likewise, some students clearly welcomed the recognition that they may not have acquired these skills before commencing their degree:

Student 7 (applied soft)

“I was really relieved when they said that we could go to sessions on Harvard or how to write at this level. I mean we got here by learning one set of skills but now we need another set.”

And others suggested the need for a differentiated understanding of learner attributes.

Student 4 (pure soft)

“It’s really annoying that they just assume that we don’t have the skills that they want. Some tutors tell us, over and over again, that students nowadays don’t have the same training that they used to do and that they didn’t used to have all these study support sessions for things that we should already know.”

How do they know this? We get told this before we've even done one assignment which makes us feel like failures before we even get going.”

Thus category 1 represents skills based experiences which are predicated on a deficit notion of the learner.

#### ***4.2.2. Category 2 - Support from academic staff exploring assessment tasks in order to improve grades.***

Whilst category 2 is similar to category 1 in that the language used in excerpts that align with category 2 retain a sense of remediation of knowledge deficit, the qualitative difference between category 1 and category 2 is that category 1 was created to represent experiences that were described as focussing primarily on the generic skill set to be acquired by learners and category 2 has a central focus on the individual, and sometime complex, learning needs of the student. It is worth noting that, for responses that align with category 2, the familiarity of the ‘student–tutor’ relationship was described as central to this bespoke support. This was held in contrast to the unfamiliarity of the ‘student-central support’ relationship which, in the same excerpts, is described as being a barrier to learner focussed support. This was justified, by one student, who said:

Student 5 (applied soft)

“I suppose the tutor is closer to your studies. I mean that they know the way we think, they've had discussions with us and listened to us talk; they know what we are trying to say and why. Now, someone from Study Support wouldn't know that, would they? So, they can find out which skills the tutors say that we need but they don't know us. They don't know how we are thinking and what we are struggling with, so the advice is general, I guess they can't know us all so that have no choice but to do the general stuff.”

In this quotation, student 5 frames study support within the tutor-student relationship in order to highlight the specificity of learner focussed support.

This quotation followed the description of a tutorial in which the student had experienced what she called “a light bulb moment” saying:

“I suddenly understood why I had been going wrong, X (the tutor) told me that all I was doing was using the literature to support my thinking but I wasn’t being critical of the literature. She said I do this in discussion, too, and I hadn’t realised it.”

It is interesting that, in the example given, anyone familiar with academic requirements may have been able to discern this difficulty and advise accordingly, however, student 5 appeared to respond to the comparison drawn between her behaviour during seminars and her writing.

In some quotations that align with this category students described particular areas of difficulty:

Student 9 (pure hard)

“I’ve always struggled with creating an argument, I tend to waffle”

In this excerpt the student did not go on to describe study support in terms of generic sessions that develop her power of argument, as one might reasonably expect, instead, she appeared to view amelioration of this difficulty as a process that required knowledge of her individual learning style, stating that:

“I need to sit down with someone who knows me. When you do that, say, in a tutorial, the tutor can tell you exactly where you’re going wrong from having listened to you in so many sessions. Over time, they get to know the way you think. My tutor told me, right at the beginning of the tutorial, that I’m a visual thinker. When I asked her how she knew that she said that she’d picked it up across the sessions.”

This statement demonstrates a faith in the student-tutor relationship; however, it is, perhaps, pertinent that none of the excerpts that align with category 2 referred to the subject knowledge held by their tutor even where the descriptions focussed on support given in order to pass a particular assignment. Terms that relate to the specificity of the subject under study are conspicuous by their absence. In contrast, use of the terms “helped me” and “showed me” were typical of responses that resulted in the construction of this category as demonstrated in the following quotation from student 14 (applied hard), who said:

“My tutor helps me to structure my writing because he knows how I think and can tell me how to get that across in my writing which is something that I struggle with.”

***4.2.3. Category 3: Seminar tasks (including those facilitated by the use of a virtual learning environment) that explicitly develop aspects of ‘study’ such as critical thinking, which may, or may not, link to the formal assessment.***

Whilst category 3 retains a primary focus on the learner, rather than on generic skills or particular academic disciplines, the qualitative difference between this category and category 2 is that quotations that resulted in the construction of this category described experiences in terms of interactions with a tutor who was seeking to develop learner potential rather than interactions with a tutor attempting to remediate difficulties. This was most evident in the language used to describe such experiences which included the word “challenge” and descriptions of “being pushed to achieve my potential” (student 1, pure soft). The potential referred to by students was described in

relation to academic reading, thinking, and the ability to develop and sustain an argument. For example, student 7 (applied soft) explained that:

“I think some of the tasks that we are given in modules really bring us on especially some of the reading you get. For instance, I was really interested in cognitive behaviour therapy but couldn't get the hang of academic reading so the tutor gave me an article to read about cognitive behaviour therapy and asked me to write an abstract for it. I found this really hard and a bit strange because we don't have to write abstracts for our assignments, but, because the article was related to CBT, I got into it and then it was really interesting pulling it apart and really thinking about it, deeply. I'm starting to do that with other readings now, my tutor is actually pushing me quite hard; keeps asking me what I've read and what I think about it.”

In citing this as an actual, but typical, example of study support this student elected to share an experience in which interactions with her tutor enabled her to access academic texts. This is the first category, within the hierarchy, that is based upon quotations that all but ignored written work and assignments. Typically, students talked about being “made to think” (student 5, applied soft) and being stretched.

Student 12 (pure hard)

“One of our tutors holds group tutorials where he just fires questions at us and it's really hard at the time but it really gets us thinking.”

Student 12 became animated when describing this experience and, in contrast to quotations linked to categories 1 and 2, appeared to relish the challenge of the unknown. Similar experiences were described in which challenging activities were facilitated by a tutor but enacted with peers:

Student 15 (applied hard)

“Blackboard helps you to listen to other people and then contribute when you have got more time to think about it. Blackboard is great because it gives me a voice, and then people respond. We had a debate last week that went on for days and, one day, we were all still on there past mid-night. I know this probably isn’t the kind of thing you are looking for but this is the best kind of study support as it provokes your thinking, encourages you to read and then you have to write a response so you develop the ability to formulate your thoughts in a written context.”

In this quotation student 15 describes a somewhat complex interplay between thinking, articulation and response and this experience demonstrates development opportunities that had been grasped by the student group. The resulting ‘spirit’ of the quotation indicates a shift from the learned helplessness associated with categories one and two

***4.2.4. Category 4: Reflective, analytical, debates, both formal and informal, that allow opportunities to express a viewpoint and critique the viewpoints of others, within a particular academic discipline.***

As for category 3, category 4 is based upon quotations that describe experiences in terms of developing potential rather than remediating difficulty. However, category four differs from category three in that I have interpreted these experiences as being aimed at enculturation within a particular subject or discipline.

For example, when describing why he saw study support as only being useful when conducted within his discipline student 5 (applied soft) stated that:

“Study support, for me, is when we get to develop as educational thinkers. The way educational research is conducted is quite different from accounting, which is my background, so I get the most from sessions that help me to understand education and social science research, so that I can be part of it. I can’t get that from study support, it has to come from education staff”

In describing a wish to “be part of” an educational and social sciences research community student 5 dismisses the potential contribution from staff, albeit dedicated to study support, who were not members, themselves, of the discipline to which he aspired. This perspective was echoed by students across the research sample with student 13 (applied hard) arguing that:

“in the business world, you need to be able to think in a certain way you can only do that by being *in it*; by thinking and debating as someone who is studying business. Our debates are great but when I speak to my housemates, they don’t get it, the level of challenge that I need only comes from people on my course.”

In this quotation student 13 talks about needing to be able to “think in a certain way” and it is interesting that she argues that this is only possible by being “in it”; by thinking and debating with fellow business students. Whilst one might view thinking and debating as qualities that one could expect across all undergraduate disciplines, student 13 makes the distinction between the levels of support and development that she can get from peers within her discipline and that which she can get from peers from other disciplines.

Similarly, student 10 (pure hard) described an experience that all but precluded generic support:

“I know there’s all these study support things that the university do but when you ask me to describe an actual example of study support the thing that springs to mind is this big discussion we were having, last term, about the views across society about maths. It started in the pub and just went on and on, we even started a facebook group about it and got other mathematicians involved. It was fantastic, you talk about study support – that’s study support because it really got me thinking, with other mathematicians, about my subject.”

This student talked about being a member of a specific discipline and framed study support in terms of activities that enabled his enculturation within, and access to, that discipline. In this excerpt it is apparent that student 10 saw the discipline as including people beyond the university community; this was mirrored by quotations from other interviews across the research sample with student 2 making reference to “the psychological field” and student 7 to the “nursing world.”

**4.2.5. Referential and structural aspects of categories of description**

Analysis of these categories of description can lead to further organisation of the outcome space. In the table below, these categories have been organised with respect to their referential and structural composition.

*Table 4.2 Structural and referential aspects of categories of description - students*

<b>Structural</b>	<b>Referential</b>		
	<b>Generic Skills focus</b>	<b>Learner focus</b>	<b>Discipline / community focus</b>
<b>Deficit foreground</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	
<b>Potential foreground</b>		<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>

I have interpreted the referential aspect of the categories of description as following a hierarchy from categories that focus upon generic skills through those that focus on learners to those that focus on the literacy practices of an academic community, as exemplified in the previous discussion. In addition, I

have interpreted categories 1 and 2 as 'foregrounding' deficit notions of learners in need of experiences that fill gaps and 'backgrounding' the potential of students and categories 3 and 4 as 'foregrounding' potential and backgrounding perceived deficits. This interpretation evolved from the ways in which students described their experiences; for categories 1 and 2, experiences were described as "filling gaps" (student # 2), "helping us with things that we don't know" (student # 14) and "passing on their expertise" (student # 6). In contrast, experiences relating to categories 3 and 4 described tasks in more challenging terms using words such as "develop" (student # 8) and "encourage" (student # 10).

### 4.3. Academic staff results

A total of 16 academic staff interviews produced the following outcome space

*Table 4.3 Academic Staff Outcome Space*

1	Taught sessions on study habits.
2	Taught sessions on academic reading.
3	Tutorial support for individual students who are struggling.
4	Tutorial support to enable students at all levels to improve grades.
5	Giving discipline specific, formative, feedback on assignments.

#### **4.3.1. Category 1 – taught sessions on study habits.**

Academic staff (Tutor) responses that aligned with category 1 predominantly described this category as an “unfortunate but necessary” (Tutor 1, pure soft) aspect of their taught input. These tutors indicated that they anticipated that most of their students would require this level of input whilst acknowledging the remedial, albeit pro-active, nature of sessions that had what was described as a “necessary focus on basic skills” (Tutor 15, applied hard).

In many instances, tutors described sessions dedicated to study habits in very resigned terms:

Tutor 15 (applied hard)

“We have to run sessions on things like time management and the amount of reading they should be doing with every new group. Nine times out of ten times they don’t take this on board, even after the taught input.”

This quotation presents an interesting paradox in that whilst the tutor appeared to be convinced that such sessions must take place, she also acknowledged that they predominantly made little impact. When asked to elaborate on this her response was somewhat defensive saying:

“Well, what are we to do, the students are so weak when they come to us we are just trying everything we think of to get them through, even if it doesn’t work every time.”

Similar comments were made by other tutors who described study support in terms of responding to perceived student deficit and as being skills based with one tutor stating that:

“We shouldn’t have to do this stuff, I’m always having to teach them how to organise themselves now and what they should expect from a degree; what we expect of them. I can’t believe I’ve become a support advisor, I’m not a tutor any more, but if I don’t do it half of them will get themselves into a mess.”  
Tutor 5 (applied soft)

This quotation is particularly interesting as the tutor appears to view the need to address such issues as unwelcome and, arguably, demeaning. By referring to themselves when in this role as a “support advisor” it would seem unlikely that this tutor considers such activities to be an integral aspect of the teaching and learning function.

In all, interviews that aligned with this category maintained a focus on the skill to be learnt rather than the nature of students or the nature of the discipline.

Tutors talked about “skill deficit” (Tutor 12, pure hard) and four skills were highlighted: organisation, individual study requirements, use of academic

resources and time management. As mentioned, interview responses that align with this category were phrased in negative terms:

Tutor 3 (pure soft)

“I run sessions on generic things like how much private study they should be doing and even what counts as an academic source, things like that. We should be able to assume that they come with this knowledge but, nowadays, we can pretty much assume that they don’t.”

Whilst making this point the tutor in question described himself as feeling “very depressed about the Widening Participation agenda” and said that “it’s not enough to send them off to Study Support, we end up having to do it as well”.

Indeed, the term “dumbing down” appeared frequently in relation to this category and students were regularly described as “not as good as they used to be”. (Tutor 2, pure soft)

#### **4.3.2. Category 2 - Taught sessions on academic reading.**

The qualitative difference between this category and category 1 is that whilst both categories describe strategies aimed to ameliorate perceived student weaknesses, responses that aligned with category 2 moved beyond a generic skills focus to a focus on developing subject specific reading abilities. As such, the experiences shared as actual, but typical, examples of study support within this category often described the subject reading in detail:

Tutor 4 (pure soft)

“One session I did looked at tackling a typical text in Education as I’m always coming across students who just didn’t seem able to do this, even though they go to Study Support. We looked at how we read for meaning; picking out what is of significance in educational literature and what to ignore and what to address.”

The spirit of this quotation appears to focus upon a genuine desire to communicate the particular forms of educational reading to students undertaking a specific course of study. It is interesting that the tutor seemed to be surprised that engagement with Study Support had failed to address the difficulties experienced in this case, however, it is also apparent that Tutor 4 saw amelioration of these difficulties as an aspect of the teaching and learning function.

Likewise, when describing the particular features of mathematical texts Tutor 11 (pure hard) said:

“I tend to ask my students “what do you understand by that concept” and then say “right, now look at it in relation to what the text book or article says about it, how near is that to what you are saying?”.

This tutor went on to describe his role as one of “interpreter” of complex mathematical texts expressing a desire to teach sessions that “show students how to read in this subject” yet still wanting to “send students to study support for support with their writing”. Other tutors made similar arguments arguing that they saw the “teaching of academic reading as an aspect of the tutor role” (Tutor 1, pure soft) whilst maintaining that “support for academic writing is the role of central support services” (Tutor 12, pure hard).

Whilst none of the interviews that aligned with category 2 highlighted assessment procedures they all demonstrated knowledge of the ways in which the readings used in their subject differed from those used in other subjects and experiences were typically described in terms of attempting to enable students to access reading in order to engage with lectures and seminar tasks.

In contrast to category 1, interview responses from which category 2 were created were phrased in positive terms, with tutors illustrating their own interests in literature within their subject, in some cases, describing their own contributions to the field. Their desire to enable students to access this literature was described, by one tutor, as “the reason I’m here, I love my subject and enjoy reading around it and want the students to be able to get the same enjoyment that I do” (Tutor 13, pure applied). In this way, category 2 represents those responses that highlighted taught input designed to enable access to a particular field of literature in order to engage with a course of study.

#### ***4.3.3. Category 3 - Tutorial support for individual students who are struggling.***

The qualitative difference between category 2 and category 3 is that whilst both categories describe strategies aimed to enable engagement with the academic process, responses that aligned with category 3 moved beyond a subject specific skill focus to a focus on the perceived needs of learners. As such, the language used in interviews that align with this category focussed on the “needs” and “particular problems” (Tutor 11, pure hard) experienced by individual students. For instance, Tutor 7 (applied soft) described a tutorial as “an opportunity to get to know the student, the way they learn and what they are getting from the sessions so that we can guide them and make sure that they get as much out of each seminar as possible.” Likewise, Tutor 3 (pure soft) described a typical tutorial as “a snapshot into the students’ world”:

“ I had a student with Dyslexia who came to me as he wanted to leave. When we got to the bottom of the problem I realised that he wasn’t really getting anything out of the key lectures. Once I realised that he needed more

processing time I was able to arrange for him to get the lecture notes beforehand and he's really getting into things now." (Tutor 3, pure soft)

This quotation demonstrates a focus on the tutor-student relationship describing teaching and learning in a supported context. The tutor demonstrated real knowledge of the learning strategies utilised by this student and had employed methods aimed to develop these strategies.

In some cases, within this category, student need was viewed as an aspect of a particular learning difficulty, as described by tutor 3, and in others this need was described in terms of a natural variation in preferred learning style. For example, Tutor 7 (applied soft) acknowledged the fact that:

"We all have different learning styles and learning strengths, our job is to ensure that *all* students can access learning."

This view challenges the position, expressed by some tutors, that study support is something that students with special educational needs require in order to learn, for example, Tutor 14 (applied hard) described study support as:

"Those things we do for disabled students or students who have different needs. I offer all of my Dyslexic students extra tutorials from day one. ....I don't do this for everyone, I wouldn't have time and don't assume that they all need it."

This assumption, that all students with Dyslexia might need study support from the outset and that students without an identified need should not, was expressed in a number of interviews with one tutor commenting that:

Tutor 6 (applied soft)

"When you ask about study support I'm assuming you mean for Dyslexic students or students with other needs like that."

And another that

Tutor 14 (applied hard):

“I’m sure I was told that we have to offer extra support to students with learning needs in order to comply with the disability discrimination act.”

Nevertheless, despite these conflicting views regarding expectations of certain students, category 3 represents interview responses that referred to individual tutorials, for a range of students who had been in receipt of the taught, skills based, sessions but were still experiencing difficulties accessing the learning activities and lectures.

#### ***4.3.4. Category 4 –Tutorial support to enable students at all levels to improve grades.***

The qualitative difference between this category and category 3 is that the focus, whilst remaining on the student, shifts from a strategy that seeks to support students who are struggling to one that aims to enhance achievement for all students. As such, this category has been constructed from interview responses that focussed on exams and assignment writing and, in particular, on supporting students to improve assessment grades. Therefore, quotations that aligned with this category demonstrated an expectation that students should be able to access seminars and lectures but might experience difficulties when faced with assessment tasks.

For example, some tutors described experiences in which they attempted to encourage their students to aim for the highest grades:

Tutor 8 (applied soft)

“It’s good to get them to think about what we are looking for, for example to get a first in Education they need to relate theory to educational practice; they’re not used to this. I think it makes the assessment criteria more accessible, some of them are worded in quite vague terms but when the

students can look at real assignments and think about how they would answer them the criteria become more real.”

In this quotation Tutor 8 acknowledges the fact that students may not be accustomed to certain ways of writing but does not frame this as a student deficit, rather, he focuses on the unfamiliarity of the task and the vague nature of assessment criteria.

Indeed, responses that align with this category tended towards descriptions of students as “unpolished gems” (Tutor 1, pure soft) yet to achieve their potential, with one tutor stating that:

Tutor 9 (pure hard)

“we don’t expect them to come in operating at distinction level in all aspects of Maths, that’s actually very rare, it’s our job to help them to get there, or as near to it as they can, we can help them to interpret the criteria so that they can start to aim for a distinction.”

In this way, ‘need’ or ‘difficulties’ were described as a natural by-product of learning and the route to achievement; as something unique to each student.

Tutor 16 (applied hard) described a typical example of this as:

“The thing I am trying to get across, when I sit down with individual students, is that there are lots of ways of achieving a distinction in an exam situation, some great pieces of work use two or three references to brilliant effect and go into them in great depth, others show a real grasp of the field – this is what the students need to grasp – that good writing in Business Studies takes different forms but has the same basic qualities, thoughtful, well written, well informed and, if you’re lucky, showing a glimmer of originality. I show them past examples of good exam answers to get them to see this”

The spirit of this quotation is illustrated by the tutor’s aim to provide experiences that enable students to review work that has been graded at distinction level in order to offer a comparison with their own writing. This, of

course, requires the student to interpret the qualities of the exemplar answers and know how to apply this interpretation to the development of their own writing. That such tutorials are offered to all students is typical of quotations that align with this category, with one tutor commenting that:

Tutor 6 (applied soft)

“It isn’t always the one’s that you’d expect who grasp this first; sometimes the weaker students, particularly those with SpLD, just read one or two good examples and the penny really drops.”

This quotation illustrates a further facet of the qualitative difference between category 3 and category 4 with Tutor 6 acknowledging the potential of all students to develop this understanding. This expression of potential contrasts sharply with the comments reported about Dyslexic students in relation to category 2.

#### ***4.3.5. Category 5– Giving discipline specific, formative, feedback on assignments.***

The qualitative difference between categories 4 and 5 is that whilst both categories focus upon student potential and the assessment process, interviews that aligned with category 5 described the purpose of study support in terms of discipline specific feedback aimed at enabling the student to become a member of a particular academic community. In such interviews the aim was described as a desire to challenge students to think within their discipline, review their assessed work and use the feedback to “feed-forward into future studies” (Tutor 15, applied hard). The fact that the students would have to begin to see themselves as members of a discipline was unique to interview responses linked to this category. When referring to the feedback given, tutor responses that align with this category drew a distinction between

generic assessment criteria and how to achieve their potential within their specific discipline.

Tutor 7 (applied soft)

“I tend not to use the terminology from the generic assessment criteria, in the hope that it will get the students thinking specifically about the subject. I also annotate assignments so I might comment on a particularly analytical point or on the use of literature. It’s quite a hard balancing act because if they want to think like a Nurse they have to start looking at evidence in a certain way and the generic criteria don’t really cover that”

In this quotation Tutor 7 describes the process of giving feedback in terms of avoiding the generic criteria. This makes a somewhat stark contrast to the comments that align with category 4 relating to enabling students to achieve assessment criteria. In fact, Tutor 7 extended this argument by claiming that the generic criteria do not cover the attributes that he is hoping to develop; namely, to think within the subject. When questioned further Tutor 7 expressed concerns that the very nature of study support structures were resulting in a conditioned response from students saying that:

“We spend so much time telling them that they have to know how to reference and reading through the assessment criteria that the students just become totally instrumental and forget that this is supposed to be about learning, about enjoying forays in a discipline.”

Other tutors who expressed similar concerns described their attempts to counteract assignment instrumentalism by focussing on a wider academic ‘field’ beyond the university.

Tutor 10 (pure hard)

“I try to relate all of my comments to current thinking in the field so that they start to refer to the wider field when they are writing and thinking – not just to this university or a generic set of criteria. It is then up to the student to go back to the original study and analyse what they could have done differently to improve their grade; they then have to relate this to their next piece of work.

Not an easy task but thinking within your discipline is an integral aspect of graduate learning.”

This quotation defines ‘graduate learning’ as the ability to think within their discipline. Similar comments were made by Tutor 1 (pure soft) who described her role as “getting the students to the point where they think as a historian” and Tutor 14 (applied hard) who argued that:

“the only graduates worth producing are ones that understand the world they are entering, that can think, act and write as a business graduate.”

These comments encapsulate the language used in relation to this category with the words “discipline” and “field” figuring more frequently than the more generic terms used in previous categories.

**4.3.6. Referential and structural aspects of categories of description**

Once again, analysis of these categories of description can lead to further organisation of the outcome space. In the table overleaf the categories have been organised with respect to their referential and structural composition.

*Table 4.4 Structural and referential aspects of categories of description – Academic staff.*

<b>Structural</b>	<b>Referential</b>			
	<b>Generic skills focus</b>	<b>Subject specific skills focus</b>	<b>Learner focus</b>	<b>Discipline / community focus</b>
<b>Input foreground</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	
<b>Output foreground</b>			<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>

I have interpreted all categories as appearing to follow a referential hierarchy from those that focus upon generic skills through those that focus on subject specific skills to those that have a learner focus and, finally, those that focus on the literacy practices of an academic discipline.

It also appears that categories 1, 2 and 3 foreground aspects of the 'input' deemed necessary to enable students to access academic learning and background 'output' in the form of assessment processes. Conversely, categories 4 and 5 foreground 'output' focussing on achievement and assessment processes and background the 'input' required to enable access to higher education. Indeed, a review of the interview transcripts reveals that the categories that focussed on academic skills, or generic notions of student need, were created from interview responses that focussed on the early student experience and the categories that focussed on learner potential or discipline specific ways of thinking were created from interview responses that focussed upon important assessment points with three such responses referring, specifically, to the dissertation.

#### 4.4 Study support staff results.

A total of 12 Study Support staff interviews produced the following outcome space.

*Table 4.5 Study Support Staff Outcome Space*

1	Induction in the use of the library
2	Taught input on study habits, Harvard Referencing and technical aspects of assignment writing
3	Support with 'redrafting' failed assignments
4	Support for individuals with a Specific Learning Difficulty (SpLD)

##### **4.4.1. Category 1: Induction in the use of the library**

Interviews with support staff that aligned with this category included descriptions of the information skills that were needed by students in higher education. It is worth noting that, whilst most responses described 1:1 sessions, responses that aligned with this category were phrased in terms of the information and library skills deemed to be a necessary precursor to engagement with higher education rather than academic skills or the needs of particular students. This was justified by one staff member who stated that:

Study Support staff member 4

“Virtually all students need induction in the use of the library, even though we have self-help guides, so we have a number of staff who do this. To be honest, they wouldn't get very far without this so I would say that it is an essential aspect of study support.”

Whilst it would be difficult to argue with the logic of this statement, per se, by describing an actual but typical example of study support as induction in the use of the library, this member of staff presents an interpretation of study

support not given by academic staff and students. Again, whilst this is, perhaps, unsurprising given the different life worlds of each group, it does raise questions about the level of shared understanding across the three groups. The need to define study support in terms of library induction was further justified by another staff member who argued that:

Study Support staff member 10

“Study often starts in the library so that has to be an essential aspect of study support. We support students to develop these skills so they can access academic sources rather than rely on the internet.”

Whilst this member of staff justified the need for students to access academic sources, rather than relying on the internet the language associated with this category focuses on training students to acquire a narrow skill set. For example, one member of staff described “logging on to the system” (Study support staff member 2) as a typical study support activity and another described a typical activity as:

Study Support staff member 11

“One in which the students can get those basic skills that they need, you know, getting into the library system, searching the catalogues, knowing how to find a journal”.

However, the same staff member did express some reservations about this approach saying:

“It would be nice to do some more advanced stuff, really, but it’s a nightmare, I don’t understand half of what the tutors say myself so it’s hard to be of any real help. At least when it comes to the library techniques we know that we can help.”

The spirit of this quotation presents a paradox in that it is difficult to discern whether this quotation represents experiences that are designed in response to wholesale perceived deficit or those that are designed by default due to a

lack of communication between academic and study support staff.

Alternatively, these experiences may say more about the professional background of study support staff as exemplified by one member who said:

Study Support staff member 11

“I suppose I’m more comfortable, more familiar, with the library induction work as I used to be a librarian. It’s quite difficult when the students come and seem to want us to know what their tutors know.”

Such comments raise questions about the rationale behind experiences that align with category 1.

#### ***4.4.2. Category 2: Taught input on study habits, Harvard Referencing and technical aspects of assignment writing.***

The qualitative difference between this category, and category 1, is that whilst interviews that aligned with category 2 was still described in terms of training students to develop a set of necessary skills, these were related, in the examples given, to academic skill deficit rather than an insufficiency of information skills. Therefore, in such interviews staff would talk about planning, and delivering, sessions that were designed to address a range of academic skills and attributes from study habits to Harvard Referencing. Interestingly, this category bears a clear resemblance to category 1 of the academic staff interviews; however, tutor responses for that category were phrased in negative terms, describing such activities as “unfortunate but necessary”. In contrast, study support staff responses that align with category 2 are described in more pro-active terms in relation to offering experiences designed to address assumed skill gaps.

Study Support staff member 5

“We now know that most students are going to need sessions on referencing and answering an exam question or even about grammar and paragraphing. We seem to get more and more requests for these sessions each term. ”

This quotation describes what one member of staff called “low level technical skills” (study support staff member 8) with the primary focus resting upon an assumption that all students require a predetermined input.

It is interesting to note that these sessions were described as “in demand” (Study Support staff member 5) with two members of study support arguing that such sessions should be taught by staff based within particular faculties or departments:

Study Support staff member 11

“I know I am in a unique position, being based within a faculty, but that allows me to teach Harvard referencing and other aspects of assignment writing to the whole year group. This way I get to know them, as individuals, and can then follow this up with seminars as I have slots in the timetable planned in. This saves so much time.”

This response offers a somewhat unique view of study support staff attempting to create a more intimate relationship with students. Likewise, Study Support staff member 12 commented upon the benefits of being located within a given faculty arguing that:

“Being based in a faculty is great, and quite rare here, but it gives me a real insight into the impact of the support I give. I did a session last week on referencing and the tutor was able to tell me that their referencing had improved as a result. You don’t get this feedback in central services.”

Nevertheless, the language associated with this category focused upon training students to acquire a set of processes rather than enabling students to

develop a level of understanding about these processes. Indeed, many members of this staff group described aiming to:

“Train the students to do these things for themselves rather than coming to us all the time” (Study Support staff member 13)

and

“teach them a set of skills so that they can do them without thinking; so they become second nature.” (Study Support staff member 5).

As such, category 2 has been created in response to interview excerpts that describe training students to develop a predetermined set of academic related skills.

#### **4.4.3. Category 3: Support with ‘redrafting’ failed assignments**

The qualitative difference between category 3 and category 2 lies in the fact that, whilst still based upon interview excerpts that described a desire to train students to acquire an identified skill set, category 3 was expressed in terms of assisting particular students to develop the skills and strategies necessary in order to achieve a pass. As such, these quotations focussed on the needs of a particular group of learners. However, what is surprising, in this case, is that these activities were described in very generic terms. In all cases, staff described giving the student a set of tips, for example, one member of staff commented that:

“They need to understand the formula; at level 4 they just need to be able to describe the focus of the essay and use literature to get a pass. We tell them this and it’s as though we’ve given them the keys to the castle.” (Study Support staff member 3)

Similar comments were made by other members of staff in relation to group sessions:

“We sometimes hold group sessions for students who have failed or who want to improve their grade. We get to know the students and work out why they might have failed and then go through a basic formula that, if they follow, should secure them a pass”. (Study Support staff member 1)

*Interviewer: can you describe this for me?*

“Well, for example, we usually end up telling them to keep sentences short, to always use a topic sentence at the beginning of a paragraph, to follow the formula – tell them what you are going to say, say it, and then re-cap what you have said – it works every time and the students keep asking us for this session.”

Despite the confidence expressed in relation to the efficacy of this strategy, other staff members expressed some reservations about the public nature of this approach preferring a more personal approach:

Study support Staff member 6

“students who have failed don’t often feel comfortable sitting in a group with other students who have failed so I think it’s more appropriate to hold 1:1 sessions, even though it’s time consuming and we only do the same things over and over again because they tend to need the same things I still think it’s better for the student to be able to come in private.”

*Interviewer: what kind of things do you do?*

“we practice writing an essay plan, writing a paragraph that makes sense; those sorts of things. They usually need lots of practice before they get the hang of things.”

This sentiment was echoed by other members of the group who described “getting students to practice their technique” (Study Support staff member 2) and “encouraging them to find a formula that works for them and sticking with it” (Study Support staff member 6). In some cases members of this group talked specifically of “drilling the students” (Study Support staff member 11) with one member of staff described an actual, but typical, example of study support as:

“I tend to spend a long time with students getting them to practice these skills over and over again. I start with an opening paragraph and, in the end, they can write a good opening paragraph that would suit almost any assignment. I also get them to write a good concluding paragraph that they could use in any assignment. I’ve found that these two things alone usually secure a pass at level 4.” (Study Support staff member 12)

Interestingly, Study Support staff member 6 described similar activities but argued that:

“ I know that some of my colleagues train students to develop a safe assignment writing style and I guess you could say that when I get students to practice essay writing I’m doing the same, but I do it for a different reason. With me, students practice essay writing but I only get them to do it to raise their confidence so that they can then move beyond the basics and find their own style. It gives them a safety net.”

Notwithstanding this range of responses, from those that described individual sessions to those that described group sessions, category 3 retains a primary focus on a ‘generic learner’ in that interview responses that align with category 3 describe predetermined activities designed around perceived learner needs rather than activities specifically created in response to the needs of a known learner.

#### ***4.4.4. Category 4: Support for individuals with a Specific Learning Difficulty (SpLD)***

The qualitative difference between this category and category 3 is that quotations that resulted in the construction of this category described experiences in terms of interactions that foreground the potential of individual learners even though these learners are designated as having a specific learning difficulty. In some cases, this related to the staff member identifying themselves as having a similar learning difficulty:

Study Support Staff member 7

“Being Dyslexic myself gives me an advantage in that I am able to see the strengths of Dyslexia rather than just the problems associated with it. People with Dyslexia tend to be able to mind-map so I would start there and build on the advantage that Dyslexia can give you.”

In this quotation the staff member appears to view Dyslexia as a learning type rather than a learning challenge and assumes that students with Dyslexia will have strengths to be exploited. In other quotations interviewees described the ways in which their experiences of working with learners with a specific learning difficulty, such as Dyslexia, had changed their approach:

Study Support staff member 5

“My job, with SpLD learners, is to allow them the space to develop their written skills so that they match what are usually very advanced oral skills. I can’t believe how patronising I used to be with students with Dyslexia, I didn’t intend to be but it’s the term ‘specific learning difficulty’ it implies a problem. Thinking about Dyslexia has changed so much in the last few years, thank goodness, and people now realise that dyslexia usually comes with a higher than average I.Q”

This paradox was explored in more detail by another staff member who commented that:

Study Support staff member 1

“it’s strange really, I think, as a service, that we have now learnt so much about things like Dyslexia that we expect more of our Dyslexic students than we do of students who don’t have a label. We expect students with Dyslexia to be bright but I’m not sure we expect the same of all students yet they manage to get accepted onto a degree programme.”

Such responses indicate an interesting challenge for central support services that, on the one hand, are expected to respond to a more diverse student population and, on the other are part of a society that is redefining learning differences. It is, arguably, even more interesting that the only response,

across the study support staff group, that mentioned supporting a student capable of achieving a first class honours degree aligned with this category.

Study Support staff member 2

“One student that I work with puts far too much pressure on himself. He is excellent, doing really well and probably going to get a first but keeps coming for support so that he can achieve his absolute potential. It’s nice to be working on getting the most out of someone, for a change, rather than helping them to scrape through.”

The language used in this quotation exemplifies the difference between category 4 and previous categories. By describing an experience that aims to “get the most out of someone, for a change, rather than helping them to scrape through” this staff member expressed her frustration with a working remit aimed to ameliorate difficulties. When asked about this she argued that

“It would be nice to have high expectations of all students but once you’re working with them you realise that they just don’t get it. Whether that’s due to a lack of ability or the way they’ve been taught isn’t clear but if the Dyslexic students have been taught the same way you have to conclude that they students we get nowadays just aren’t that academic.”

In all, responses that aligned with category 4 frequently described developing students with Dyslexia who were, in some cases, seen as more academically able than the rest of the student population.

#### **4.4.5. Referential and structural aspects of categories of description**

As before, analysis of these categories of description can lead to further organisation of the outcome space. In the table below, these categories have been organised with respect to their referential and structural composition.

*Table 4.6 Structural and referential aspects of categories of description – Study Support Staff.*

<b>Structural</b>	<b>Referential</b>			
	<b>Information skills focus</b>	<b>Academic skills focus</b>	<b>Generic learner focus</b>	<b>Specific learner focus</b>
<b>Training foreground</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	
<b>Development foreground</b>				<b>4</b>

All categories appear to follow a referential hierarchy from those that focus upon information skills to those that focus on academic skills followed by those that focus on generic learners to those that have a specific learner focus. I have also interpreted experiences 1, 2 and 3 as 'foregrounding' notions of training and 'backgrounding' student development. Conversely, I perceive category 4 as the only one across this research group that 'foregrounds' student development and backgrounds perceived training needs. That this category relates to a group of students with identified learning needs is, I would argue, of particular interest.

In summary, I would argue that the referential aspects of the categories of description represented here depict varying pedagogic discourses that are both classified, and framed, by power differentials between participants. In contrast, I believe that the structural aspects of these categories of description illustrate the educational identities implied by different conceptualisations of study support.

#### **4.5 Conclusions.**

The structural and referential composition of the experiences described by each participant group raise interesting questions about social cultural

contexts of these experiences and the ways in which each group interprets study support activity. The deficit/potential structural model expressed by students could be described as a reflection of the training / development model of support staff and the input / output model of academic staff, however, these conjectures require much deeper analysis. Likewise the referential composition of the responses of each participant group appear to reflect social rules, divisions of labour and the historical development of such practices and, as such, once more require further analysis.

In the next chapter, I intend to analyse the activity systems that define each participant group in order to increase my understanding of these structural and referential differences by examining the ways in which each group interacts and the social, cultural and material contexts that influence such interactions.

## **Chapter Five: Activity Theory Analysis**

### **5.1 Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to use Activity Theory as a heuristic device to further analyse the Phenomenographic representations created in the previous chapter. As discussed in Chapter Three, the aim, here, is to extend and complement the mapping of variation afforded by Phenomenography in order to examine the relationships between the expressions of variation and the context from which they derive; recognising that learning, and teaching, is embedded in historical, social and material contexts. In this way, each method adds a dimension to the overall analysis that is not provided by the other.

In addition, whilst each activity system will be represented by a classic Activity Theory diagram, perceived power differentials between competing systems will be illustrated by the use of different sized activity triangles. It must be noted that there is no attempt, in this study, to quantify these power differences; the intention is to model their existence and relative influence. Therefore, this chapter will begin by using the Phenomenographic data to model an activity system for each of the participant groups from which commonly expressed internal contradictions can be identified and analysed. Whilst examination of commonality of expression is not appropriate in a purely Phenomenographic study, by using Activity Theory as a heuristic device I am able to investigate these contextual dynamics in more detail. Following this, concerns and tensions articulated by each group will be used to model quaternary contradictions between interacting activity systems and scalar

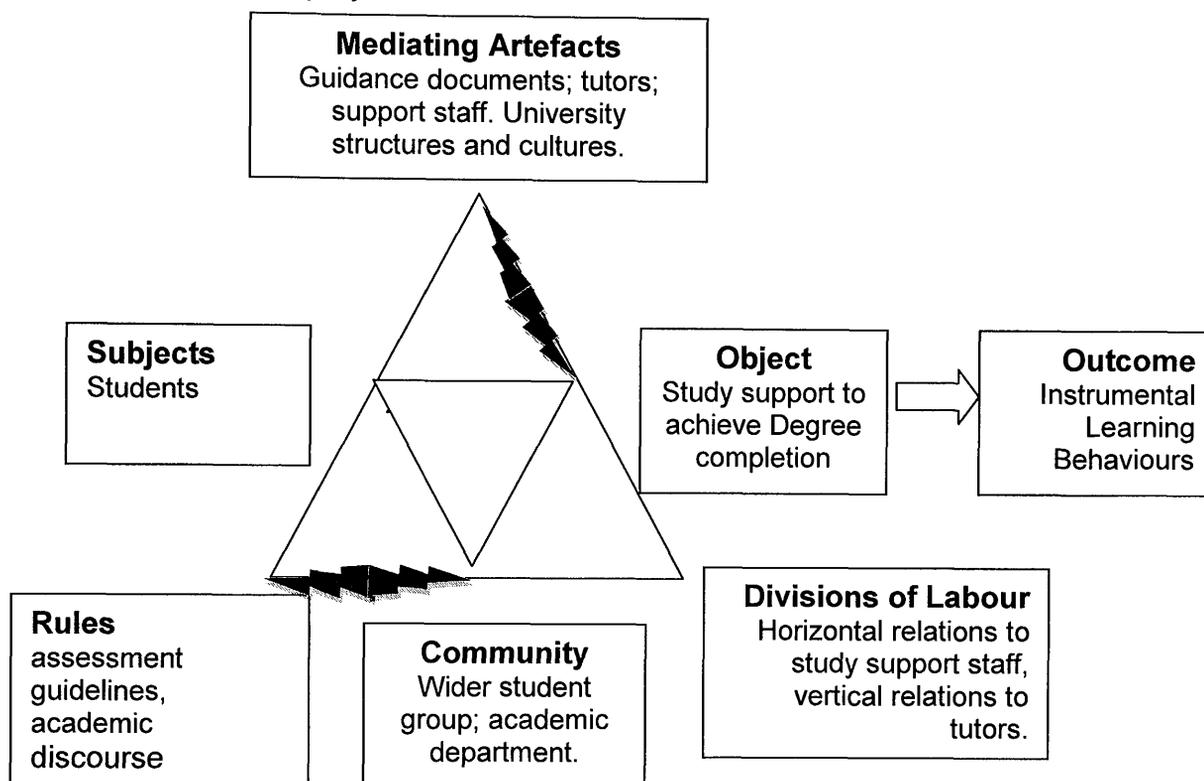
analysis will be employed to indicate power differentials evident within these contradictions.

## **5.2. Individual Activity Systems: Internal Contradictions**

### ***5.2.1. Student Activity System***

In terms of the 'structure of human activity' the interview data can be used to analyse the ways in which students perceive, and create, each node of the activity system and thus internal contradictions can be identified. In this example, the subjects under study are the sixteen students whose responses were used to create the student outcome spaces in Chapter Four. It must be noted that, when describing a particular instance of study support, different students identified with particular communities and described being subject to specific rules; such differences were useful in the last chapter in order to map variation across the sample. However, by revisiting the interview transcripts it is possible to move away from the specifics of variation and see expressions of commonality across the student group in order to understand student activity as a bounded system. As such, commonly expressed student activity has been modelled in fig 5.1, below.

Fig 5.1 Student Activity System



The model in fig 5.1 indicates two predominant internal contradictions within the student activity system, represented by red flashes. As such, tensions between the ways in which students discern the object of study support activity and the mediating artefacts that are designed to enable such activity, allows the first contradiction to be identified. Likewise, examination of the interplay between the rules of study support activity, which are perceived to be historically derived, and a more diverse emerging student community highlights a second contradiction.

#### 5.2.1.1. Contradiction # 1 (object vs. artefact).

The majority of the student interviewees viewed degree completion as their primary motivation for engaging with the 'object'; study support. In some cases students expressed concern about their own abilities, and in other cases they described study support as an obligation that university staff owe to students

in order to facilitate the acquisition of a degree. This prevailing object motivation interacts with a number of mediating artefacts that shape the outcome of student activity and create internal contradictions within the student activity system. Mediating artefacts were articulated, by the students, in three distinct ways which could be conceptualised as university wide artefacts, staff designed artefacts and negotiated artefacts.

In terms of university wide mediating artefacts, all of the students interviewed recognised the nonnegotiable nature of assessment structures and validated programmes. However, thirteen of the sixteen students expressed frustration that such systems took little account of what they appeared to view as a changing world arguing, amongst other things, that:

“Essay based assessments seem outdated nowadays; we need to develop ways of writing that are more suited to a technology society. I haven’t been prepared to work this way, I’m a twenty first century learner” (Student 3, pure soft).

In this quotation, the student in question appears to view the assessment format as a barrier to degree completion and, thus, preventing achievement of the primary purpose of student activity.

In contrast, mediating artefacts designed by staff, whilst deriving from the aforementioned structures were seen as being interpreted differently by different staff members with some staff being described as “going the extra mile to help us to understand what is needed” (Student 6, applied soft). This variation produced significant tensions with students expressing disdain for tutors that appeared to choose not to support their learning. Tutor behaviours that were described as “unhelpful” tended to be ascribed to academic staff who “insist that we’re here to learn more than how to pass a degree” (Student 14, applied hard). Whilst all of the students talked about wanting to learn as

*well* as needing to achieve their degree, this was seen as a secondary benefit of the academic process rather than the primary purpose of their university experience.

Interestingly, examples relating to the third category of mediating artefact, interpreted here as 'negotiated', were more ephemeral in nature; relating to space, time and debating foci. When discussing space and time students described "taking the initiative" (student 11, pure hard) to approach tutors and study support staff and request the forms of support, remedial or developmental, that they require. Every student that mentioned the virtual learning environment (eleven of the sixteen) described a process of negotiation with respect to the learning space and activities from "talking about things that I'm finding difficult" (Student 1, pure soft) to "starting a discussion on how to interpret the reading" (student 11, pure hard). As a result, negotiated forms of mediating artefacts did not, in themselves, create contradictions as they enabled the students to work towards the espoused objective of their activity. However, by their very nature, these artefacts served to highlight the contradictions created between student intentions and university wide artefacts and the contradictions that existed due to variation in artefacts designed by staff. Therefore this contradiction raises questions about differing pedagogic discourses and the micro-politics of study support.

#### **5.2.1.2. Contradiction # 2 (rules vs. community)**

Whilst the eight male and eight female student interview participants represented a wide range of achievement, had been selected across all disciplines and were aged between 21 and 42, it would seem that they all conformed to a set of perceived rules within a short period of entering higher

education. All sixteen students expressed the view that students were, or should be “expected to know this stuff” (Student 7, applied soft) and that, if they had not achieved expected levels of academic literacy they could not expect the academic tutor to offer guidance beyond that which the tutor elected to offer. That all sixteen students had come to the same conclusion about the rules of university engagement is significant given the variation of experience presented in Chapter Four. It is also worth noting that the students perceived these rules to be inherited from a time when fewer people aspired to higher education. Resignation and acceptance of this situation was evident across the student group; those that did not access study support typically expressed the opinion that “if we need that kind of help we shouldn’t be here” (Student 13, applied hard) and those that appeared to want study support typically articulated a low sense of self-esteem and a reluctance to be seen as “less able” (Student 10, pure hard).

In addition, whilst three of the students talked about a wider, disciplinary community, all of the students retained a significant, and in most cases exclusive, focus on a community of fellow students. The tensions created in this regard related to a reluctance to be viewed as the “the failure in the class” (student 10, applied hard). With such an intimate, and potentially competitive, community the aforementioned perceived ‘rules’ about what undergraduates should be able to do seemed to produce high levels of student anxiety; particularly in subjects that recruit low numbers.

It is also worth mentioning that students did not describe staff entering their community or themselves entering the staff community. Whilst this is unsurprising, in general, it is noticeable that the student who identified, at least

in part, with a broader disciplinary community did not see themselves and tutors as co-members of such communities. In fact, a significant number of students used somewhat oppositional language describing a “them and us” situation:

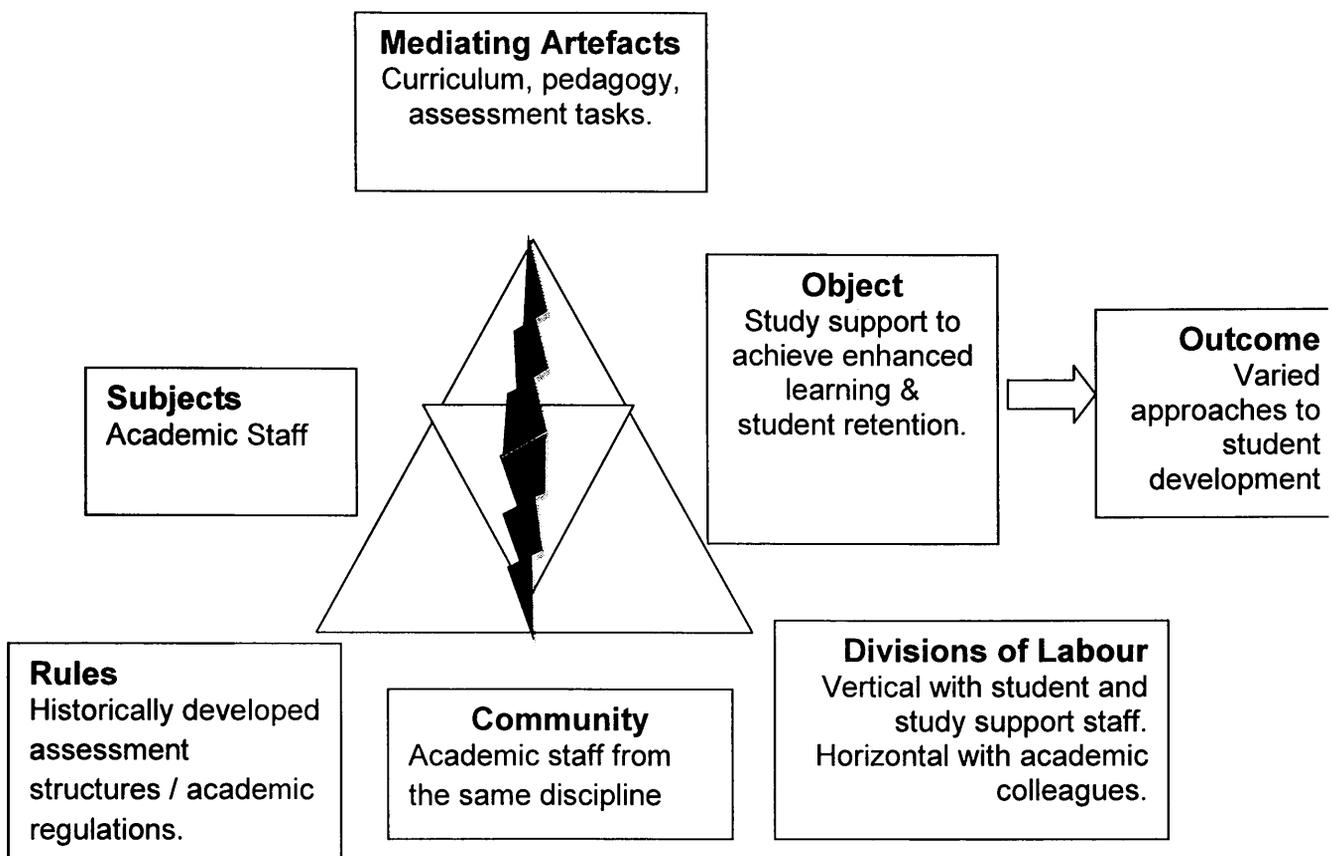
“Sometimes it’s as though they just don’t care about the students who don’t get it; it’s as though we don’t count. If it wasn’t for some of the other people in my group who have helped me and showed me how they went about doing an essay question I’d have failed long ago.” (Student 2, pure soft)

As academic staff are well positioned to reduce anxiety, this narrow, and arguably insular, community view leaves student who require study support little opportunity to avoid the “less able” moniker and raises questions about the educational identities produced by tensions between learners and a socially constructed body of knowledge.

### ***5.2.2. Academic Staff Activity System***

As before, the Phenomenographic data can be used to analyse the ways in which academic staff perceive and create each node of the activity system and thus internal contradictions can be identified.

Fig 5.2 Academic Staff Activity System



The model above indicates an internal contradiction within the academic staff activity system, again represented by a red flash. This was the only internal contradiction that I perceived to be expressed across the majority of academic staff interviews and relates to tension created when different members of academic staff from the same discipline create vastly differing mediating artefacts.

### 5.2.2.1. Contradiction (community vs. mediating artefacts)

Without exception, academic staff members described their community in terms of their subject department; in many cases portraying practices that were specific to that subject. For example, Tutor 8 (applied soft) described departmental practices that were moving away from generic assessment

criteria as this was “getting in the way of helping them to develop the ability to think like a Nurse”. Whilst there appeared to be no sense of overlap between the academic staff, study support staff and student communities, it must also be noted that, when discussing approaches to study support, there was no evidence of overlap between academic staff communities in one faculty, or subject area, and those from another. This was acknowledged by some tutors who defended this pedagogic isolation by describing their subject as “different” (Tutor 11, pure hard) and their students as having “particular needs” (Tutor 5, applied soft).

Indeed, three tutors (all working within the applied soft category) made specific reference to the added complication of teaching on a “professional degree” (Tutor 4, applied soft) although a similar argument was put forward by the tutors from subject areas that required specific mathematical or statistical understanding. These members of academic staff insisted that generic study support staff were insufficiently qualified to support this aspect of study thus resulting in the appointment of a subject specific member of study support staff in two departments.

As a result, these somewhat disparate communities interact with a number of mediating artefacts that shape the outcome of academic staff activity. In contrast to the student interviews, academic staff focussed on two levels of mediating artefact: university wide structural systems and the mediating artefacts that they created themselves.

In terms of structural systems, all but two of the academic staff talked about the constraints of “a system that no longer meets need” (Tutor 3, pure soft) expressing concern about those students that needed more support than

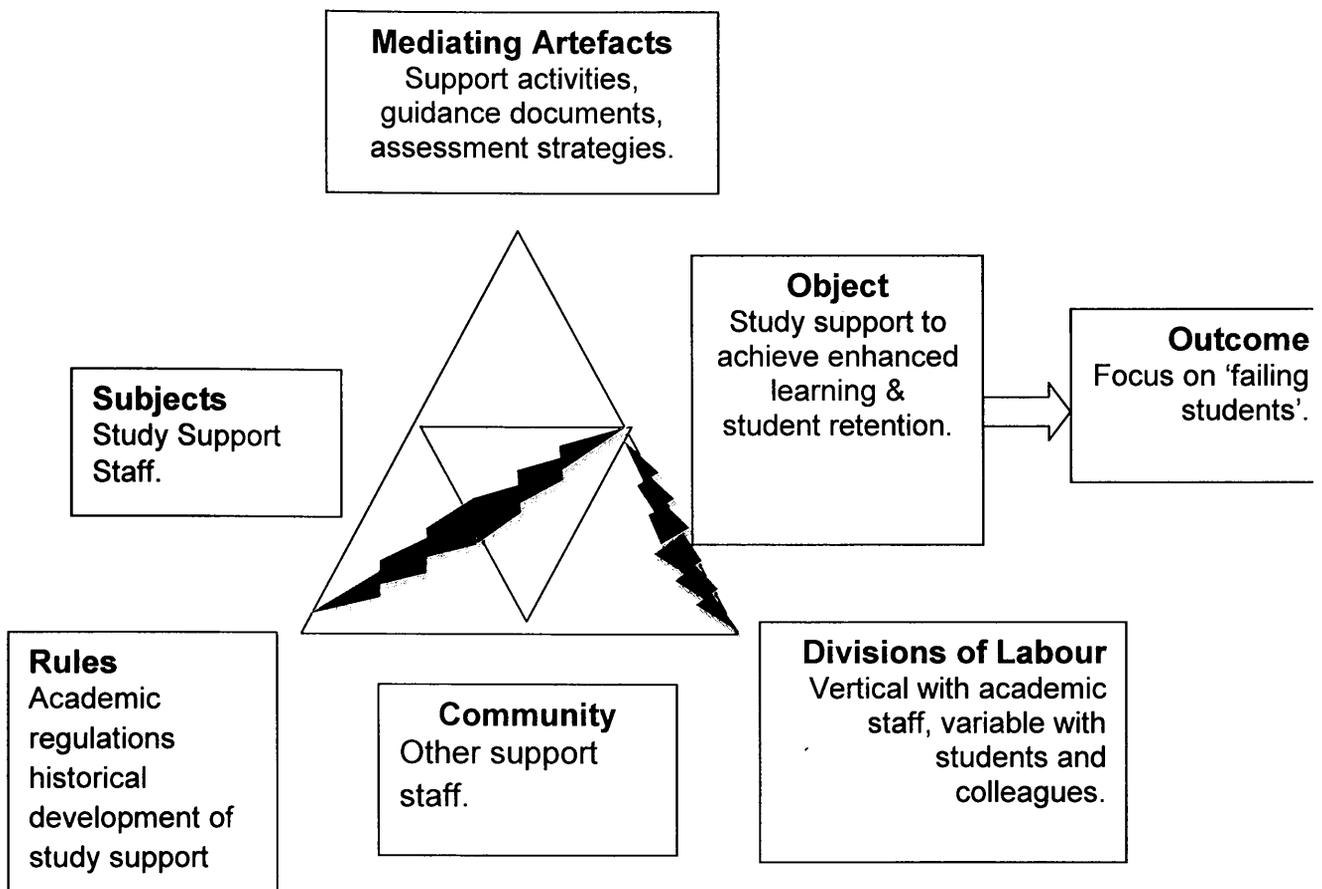
could be provided and, at times, frustration at the inflexibility of assessment structures. These concerns created particular tensions where the community culture was believed to militate against pedagogic review and adaptation. For example, in the applied soft disciplines, staff described their frustration at “being brow-beaten by colleagues who don’t think we should be commenting on draft essays” (Tutor 6) and in pure hard disciplines tutors talked about “being told not to prop the weak students up as this does a disservice to the ones who can do it on their own” (Tutor 10).

In response to these constraints and to the perceived “changing student profile” (Tutor 11, pure hard) seven tutors described mediating artefacts that they had created in order to support students. For instance, Tutor 4 (pure soft) described an activity which assisted a student who was having difficulty in reading for meaning. In all, eight of the tutors described choosing to create such mediating artefacts although they did concede that this was time consuming and unpopular with some colleagues. Nevertheless, in contrast to those tutors that claimed such activities to be a “distraction from the subject” (Tutor 9, pure hard) this group of tutors described wanting to “teach the subject through these activities” (Tutor 4, pure soft).

### ***5.2.3. Study Support Staff Activity System***

As with the student and academic staff outcome spaces, the study support staff outcome spaces, and the interview quotations that were used to devise them, can be used to model a study support staff activity system and, once again, it is possible to make tentative suggestions regarding contradictions between nodes.

Fig 5.3 Study Support Staff Activity System



The model above indicates two internal contradictions within the study support staff activity system, again represented by red flashes. Both of these contradictions have been interpreted as having a focus on the object of support staff activity; the first in relation to tensions created when academic regulations are perceived as barriers to achievement of the object aims and the second in relation to tensions between divisions of labour and object aims.

#### 5.2.3.1. Contradiction # 1 (object vs. rules)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, all twelve members of study support staff described the object aim of their activity as the need to ensure that students are “given the support to pass” (Study Support staff member 4). Whilst three members of this group talked about developmental activities all members of study support

staff focussed on what they described as “failing students” (Study Support staff member 1) or “vulnerable students” (Study Support staff member 8). Interestingly, seven members of study support staff acknowledged overreliance upon dedicated support services as an unwelcome consequence of this object aim. In addition, four members of study support staff expressed frustration at being forced to adopt such instrumental objectives due to what was described as “a real lack of understanding about the type of students we are getting now” (Study Support staff member 1). Indeed, another member of this group described themselves as “sitting with my finger in a dam when I really want to be reviewing the whole system” (Study Support staff member 8). Overall, the interview transcripts from the study support staff demonstrate a clear presumption of “trying to help students who desperately need help” (Study Support staff member 4) whilst recognising that the systems employed to do this “need a radical re-think” (Study Support staff member 2).

It is interesting to note that every member of this participant group described the rules of study support as “designed to suit the academic staff” (Study Support staff member 2) and thus, inadvertently, preventing achievement of their object aim. For example, ten members of this group described academic staff as “caring more about their own research than student success and being encouraged to do so” (Study Support staff member 5) and several talked in oppositional terms arguing that the academic regulations allowed “tutors to dump all aspects of student support at our door so that they can get on with their research” (Study Support staff member 3).

Furthermore, unlike academic staff, who demonstrated a degree of autonomy in rule interpretation, study support staff expressed resignation towards rules

and systems that they perceived to have been created without “any potential for adaptation” (Study Support staff member 8). Of the ten members of study support staff based centrally, eight argued that such rules and systems were outdated and in need of review although most acknowledged that this was “unlikely to happen any time soon” (Study Support staff member 2). As such, this contradiction highlights concerns about the way in which study support is framed in the university under study.

### **5.2.3.2. Contradiction # 2 (object vs. divisions of labour)**

Unlike the student and academic staff responses, divisions of labour across the ten centrally based study support staff demonstrated homogeneity of perception with one member of staff remarking that:

“It would be nice to have a choice but our workload is defined by the students who come to us and by how much the tutor is prepared to do, usually, nothing at all, which means that our job is to do whatever is required” (Study Support staff member 8).

Whilst it could be argued that responding to tutor and student need is the most effective way of achieving the espoused support staff objective of ensuring that students are “given the support to pass”, few members of support staff interviewed subscribe to this view. Indeed, eight members of this group expressed frustration about tutors and students who “keep asking for the same things but these things don’t work, we need to be doing something different” (Study Support staff member 7).

Additionally, every member of this group talked about “being overwhelmed with workload” (Study Support staff member 4) and described high levels of stress and staff absence due to demand exceeding supply. Six members of this group commented, specifically, on low levels of labour from students

protesting that “students seem to expect us to do all the work for them” (Study Support staff member 1). This situation was described by one member of staff as “filling our day with things that we know, in the end, won’t make much difference to more than half of the students who need our support” (Study Support staff member 2). In this sense, the aforementioned stress levels and degree of staff absence seemed to be attributed, at least in part, to demoralisation and frustration stemming from tensions between activity objectives and what appear to nonnegotiable divisions of labour.

Of the two members of staff based in departments, one recognised a change in divisions of labour noting that “the tutors seem to be more willing to take responsibility for some aspects of study support so that I can concentrate on the general stuff” (Study Support staff member 11). However, the other departmentally based member of staff expressed frustration about a lack of autonomy with respect to academic staff perceptions of her own, and student, labour. Once again, this absence of any sense of entitlement to define their own role resulted, in the words of one staff member in “a demoralised group of people who have no say in how we achieve what we know needs doing” (Study Support staff member 3). Thus, this contradiction raises questions about power, control and autonomy.

### **5.3. Interacting Activity Systems: Quaternary Contradictions.**

As mentioned, in the introduction to this chapter, I now intend to analyse the ways in which these activity systems interact, and the power differentials between interacting systems, in more detail. The predominant tensions expressed across all three interview samples relate to three activity system nodes: rules, object and divisions of labour.

#### **5.3.1. Tension # 1 (rules)**

Tensions expressed by students in relation to the 'rules' of study support focussed, as discussed earlier in this chapter, on support needs that emerged in response to assessment strategies that were viewed as outdated. Indeed, the aforementioned student assertions that traditional essay writing could be viewed as a barrier to achievement for learners unused to prolonged writing tasks illustrate a degree of frustration with widespread assessment practice in higher education, which, in the words of one student "means that I now need study support for the first time in my life" (Student 4, pure soft). Descriptions of "bite size assignments, and portfolios" (Student 13, applied hard) prior to higher education could be seen as unrealistic preparation for sustained essay writing. However, rather than being critical of practice prior to higher education, presumably due to the success experienced via engagement with these forms of assessment, students described assessment formats in the form of essays in higher education as being outdated and out of tune with contemporary forms of discourse.

Interestingly, whilst both the academic and study support staff regularly described the students as "weaker than before" (Tutor 2, pure soft) and "not as strong as the students we used to get" (Study Support staff member 12) no

member of either staff group acknowledged any mismatch between the expectations of access routes, whether via A' Level or vocational qualifications, and those of higher education. Furthermore, few members of either staff group expressed a lack of confidence in the appropriateness of assignment formats and none made reference to twenty first century learners or an emerging contemporary discourse. Nevertheless, all academic staff members described the rules of their activities in relation to study support as restricted and two tutors expressed frustration at a culture that did not encourage collaboration with study support staff. Nonetheless, it is notable that, whilst these tutors acknowledged that student needs were increasing, this was ascribed, in most cases, to reduced entry criteria rather than to a lack of synergy between forms of learning in higher education and those that precede it.

It would seem from these accounts that the tutors perceived the rules of study support as being ill-matched to a more diverse student group and they described their role as "increasingly difficult" (Tutor 1, pure soft).

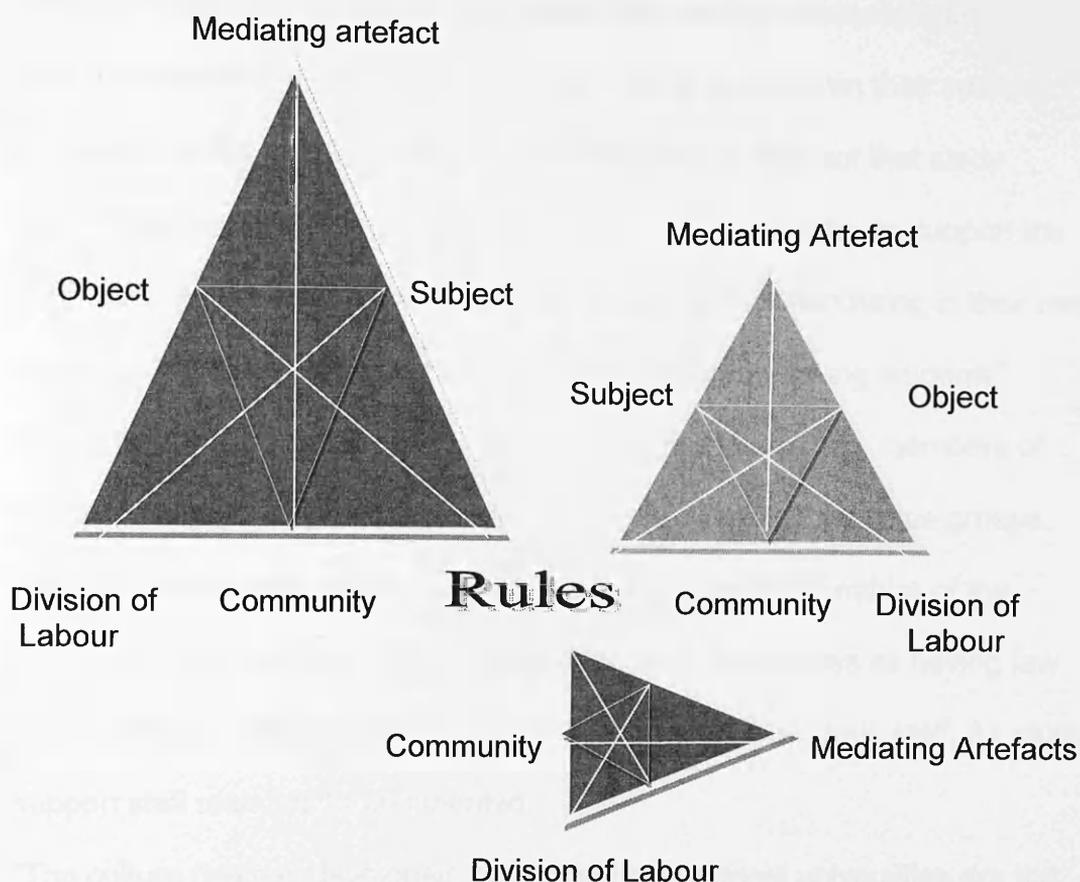
Given this, it is worth noting that a number of members of study support staff described the rules of study support as "designed to suit the academic staff" (Study Support staff member 2). Furthermore, the lack of autonomy with regard to rule interpretation felt by study support staff contrasts with the degree of freedom, albeit restricted, described by both members of academic staff who had elected to work more collaboratively with study support staff in order to address student need. Whilst this implies a two-way collaboration, in both instances these opportunities had been initiated by academic staff in order to achieve specific tutor goals. Likewise, students experienced a degree

of autonomy in terms of the rules of study support when talking about approaching staff, both face-to-face and on the virtual environment, to specify the forms of support that they needed. On these occasions students talked about “taking the initiative” when faced with support mechanisms that failed to meet their needs.

However, whilst notions of autonomy and power were raised by all three participant groups, it is worth noting that no group acknowledged their own potential to exert power, albeit indirectly, upon another group. In addition, where individual participants discussed opportunities to interpret rules according to their own needs and objectives, it is noticeable that both tutors and students recognised some potential for negotiation whilst study support staff, in contrast, specifically commented upon a lack of autonomy in terms of rule negotiation.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of these tensions fig 5.4 models the intersection of the ‘rules’ node for the three activity systems modelling the way in which I have interpreted the power differentials between them. To clarify the distinction between the three systems, the academic staff activity triangle is blue, the student activity triangle is green and the triangle to represent study support staff is brown.

Fig 5.4 Interacting Activity Systems - Rules



In this example all three participant groups report a sense of powerlessness about a study support system that is recognised, by each group, to be unequal to the needs of the current student body. However, these tensions only becomes contradictions, or conflicting forces (Engeström, 1999:32), when the participant group feels unable to regain a sense of power by interpreting, or adapting, the rules of study support to more closely meet their aims.

In terms of the interaction between academic staff and students, whilst both groups' express high levels of frustration, as the arbiters of rules and academic regulations, the academic staff posses much more power than the

students. This power dynamic is demonstrated by the practice of tutors “sending” students to study support rather than seeing themselves as responsible for the academic development of the students on their courses. What adds to the power dynamic in this interaction is the fact that study support staff appear to have neither the time, nor opportunity, to support the acquisition and development of the higher order skills, often being in their own words “in the invidious position of having to prop up the failing students” (Study Support Staff member 7). Therefore, in this interaction, members of staff from study support services are the least powerful of the three groups; many of the students express exasperation at the remedial nature of the support offered and study support staff described themselves as having few opportunities to initiate collaboration or dialogue with academic staff. As study support staff member 11 commented:

“The culture that has developed, here, and I guess most universities are the same, is one of tutor dominance. They call us when they want us to do something but it doesn’t work the other way round. It has taken us years to have Study Support recognised as a faculty in its’ own right but we are really seen as the poor relation”

This level of frustration was expressed, in varying degrees by fourteen of the study support staff. It would seem that, in the university under study, the response to perceived student deficit is to offer technical and remedial support when, as mentioned by study support staff number 11, some members of this group feel that:

“It would be nice to do some more advanced stuff, really, but it’s a nightmare, I don’t understand half of what the tutors say myself so it’s hard to be of any real help. At least when it comes to the library techniques we know that we can help.”

In conclusion, this tension demonstrates quaternary contradictions around the rules and practices that have been adopted in the university under study and

further examination of these contradictions reveals entrenched power differentials between academic staff, students and study support staff. These differentials appear to be hierarchical with academic staff possessing the highest degree of power followed by students who describe a degree of autonomy and study support staff who describe a working life defined by nonnegotiable rules.

### **5.3.2. Tension # 2. (Object)**

Tensions between systems in relation to the object aim of activity appear to stem from a conflict between the functional nature of objects described by the majority of students and study support staff and the more liberal notions expressed by academic staff. That the opinions expressed by academic staff diverge in this respect could be seen as surprising given the fact that study support, in the university under study, is vested in a separate faculty to which tutors 'send' students whom they perceive to be in need of help. As such, it is, perhaps, worthy of comment that ten tutors described "enhancing the learning experience" (Tutor 8, applied soft) as the object aim of study support.

Furthermore, these tutors expressed high levels of frustration about the fact that students were perceived as adopting what was framed as an instrumental approach to study support. This concern was illustrated by Tutor 15 (applied hard) who argued that:

"The students really haven't embedded the necessary skills of reading. Even though they have been given loads of reading the kind of strategies they're picking up are superficial. They seem to adopt essay driven key word approaches, they are scanning for quotes not reading for depth. I think this is a technique that study support give them. "

Other tutors described students as "only interested in developing the skills they need in order to get their degree" (Tutor 6, pure hard) and "only prepared

to do the bare minimum in order to pass” (Tutor 10, pure hard). Nine tutors described this as counterproductive with Tutor 2 (pure soft) expressing concern that:

“Those students who only want tips and techniques that will help them to do enough to pass, perhaps because they’re having to work to fund their degree, never get the opportunity to develop their wider understanding of the subject. They demand so much more help than they actually need because they’re always trying to cut corners rather than trying to learn how to think.”

Nevertheless, whilst academic staff conveyed exasperation at this behaviour study support staff demonstrated greater levels of understanding for such pragmatism with Study Support staff member 11 acknowledging that:

“It’s a changing world, the debt that these kids end up with is huge and they want something to show for that.”

Indeed, as discussed earlier, every member of study support staff described the object aim of their activity as the need to ensure that students are “given the support to pass” (Study Support staff member 4) focussing on “failing students” (Study Support staff member 1) or vulnerable students” (Study Support staff member 8). However, it must also be noted that for a number of these staff members this appeared to be something of a necessary evil; resulting in frustration at being forced to adopt such instrumental approaches. Nonetheless, reluctantly adopted, or otherwise, the fact that study support staff described the object of study support in functional terms appears to have resulted in friction between these two staff groups.

To compound this friction, fourteen of the sixteen students interviewed described degree completion as the object aim of study support. In some cases students expressed concern about their own abilities:

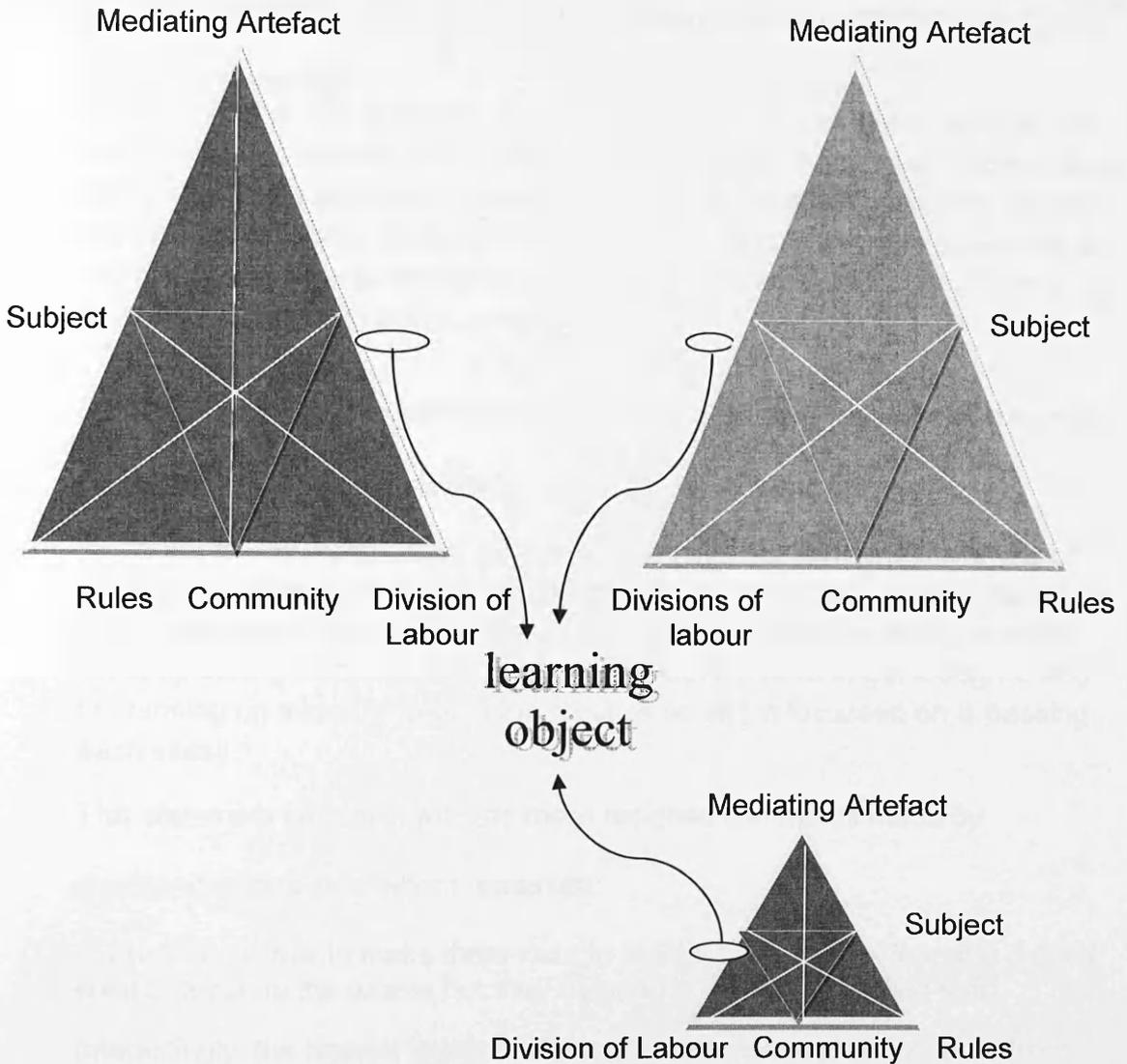
“I need study support if I’m going to get this degree, not everyone knows how to write an academic essay” (Student 14, applied hard),

and in other cases, they described study support as an obligation that university staff owe to students in order to facilitate the acquisition of a degree:

“I would say this is the role of the teaching and support staff; I know they teach us about a subject but they should also be trying to help us to pass. That is why they’re here to help us to get a degree and it’s obviously important to them, too, as they are always publishing the success rates.” (Student 1, pure soft)

In contrast to the previous examination of tensions around the rules of study support, tensions around the object of study support reveal levels of power and autonomy that privilege both the student and tutor groups. Figure 5.5, overleaf, models the intersection of the ‘object’ node for the three activity systems demonstrating the way in which I have interpreted power differentials expressed in this instance. Once again, the academic staff activity triangle is blue, the student activity triangle is green and the triangle to represent study support staff is brown.

Fig 5.5 Interacting Activity Systems Object



In this example, the expectations that both staff groups have of student engagement with the study support process are not being met. However, as student behaviour is at times dictating staff behaviour, students are sometimes exhibiting more power than either staff group who are equally reactive in their response. Indeed, whilst all members of academic staff expressed concern about instrumental behaviour amongst students none described attempting to change these behaviours, instead, tutors talked about the pressure that they

were also under to “pass everyone or face complaint” (Tutor 3, pure soft).

However, this demonstration of student ‘power’ does not appear to have resulted in student satisfaction with one student commenting that:

Student 2 (pure soft)

“We keep being told that we’re here to learn about life not just to learn about our subject but, actually, I’m here to pass my degree; if I can learn other things at the same time great but some of the tutors can be really pompous, usually the older ones, about the purpose of education. What’s wrong with wanting to pass, why do I have to read for the joy if it – I read academic books to use them in essays – why is that so criminal?”

Student 4 (pure soft) extended this argument to discuss finance and external pressure to gain a qualification.

“My parents don’t really like the idea of university, my dad says it’s a way of putting off getting a job so they would go mad if I didn’t pass. I know the tutors sometimes have a go when we only read enough to pass an essay or when we keep asking what we have to do to pass but I’m here to get a degree and I’m running up a load of debt in the process so all I’m focussed on is passing each essay.”

This statement contrasts with the more resigned comments made by academic staff, one of whom remarked:

“I don’t know how to make them want to learn for the sake of learning. I don’t want to teach to the exams but they demand it.” (Tutor 5, applied soft)

Interestingly, the highest levels of frustration were expressed by tutors from pure, rather than applied, disciplines with tutors from professional disciplines (teaching, Nursing and Law) demonstrating far more empathy for students who, in the words of one tutor, were doing a degree “for a specific professional purpose” (Tutor 7, applied soft). Nevertheless, whilst levels of power held by tutors were, at times, lower than those held by the students, at other times they exceed student power levels and always exceed power levels held by support staff. This is evidenced in variation of tutor response; whilst some

tutors described needing to respond to student demand, others appeared to dismiss such demand viewing it as the responsibility of support staff.

In contrast, study support staff appeared to be reconciled to student learning behaviours arguing that:

“you can understand it, really, my daughter can’t afford to go to uni, the fees and loans are crippling so you can see why there want to get the degree at any cost” (Study support staff member 7).

As support staff appear to exhibit extremely low levels of autonomy in their response to students, and tutors, they are the least powerful of all three groups.

In all, these tensions demonstrate quaternary contradictions around the espoused object of study support which reveal entrenched power differentials between academic staff, students and study support staff. These differentials appear, at times, to benefit the students who describe taking a proactive approach to study support which result in a reactive, and by extrapolation less powerful, response from staff. At other times, these differentials appear to benefit tutors who describe some levels of autonomy in their response. As such, overall, tutors demonstrate similar power levels to the students which contrast with the levels of power described by support staff. This contradiction raises questions about the pedagogic identity of study support and the discourses that result from conflicting identities.

### **5.3.3. Tension # 3. (division of labour)**

The most common concern expressed by study support staff relates to divisions of labour. All twelve members of staff interviewed, including those based in specific departments, expressed concern that academic staff did not

see learner development as an aspect of their role. This concern was exemplified by Study Support staff member 1 who observed that:

“The students often say that they would prefer to go over their assignments with tutors but quite a few tutors have told me that they don’t see student support as part of their job and seem to feel quite annoyed that students are, in their words, “not as strong as they used to be”.

In this quotation, this staff member appears to demonstrate a degree of frustration and resignation towards the attitudes of academic staff and students that was mirrored by a further seven members of the group.

However, the remaining four members of this participant group demonstrated more militant responses to what they saw as “tutors having the luxury to ignore the changing needs of the students and carry on teaching they way they always have” (Study Support staff member 3). Indeed, Study Support staff member 6 argued that:

“Tutors are just putting their heads in the sand on this one. They know the students are struggling but they send them off to us rather than trying to do anything about it themselves. Some admit that their teaching style doesn’t meet the needs of most of the students but claim that they don’t have the time to develop more support.”

Similar concerns were also expressed by some of the student group, many of whom argued that “the tutors are best qualified to support our studies so I don’t know why they send us off to study support” (Student 5, applied soft).

In contrast, eight tutors appeared to resist such demands with one stating that:

“We shouldn’t have to do this stuff, I’m always being asked to teach them how to reference now and how to structure their writing. I’m a tutor, not a support advisor” (Tutor 5, applied soft).

To add to this friction six of the students interviewed described themselves as recipients of high levels of study support staff labour but a further seven students expressed frustration at structures that prescribed high levels of, seemingly, inappropriate support.

Student 14 (applied hard)

"I know there are lots of 'how to' sessions but they're not very sophisticated. It would be nice to have a session on 'why I think differently to you' rather than 'how to construct a sentence'".

Four of the tutors acknowledged the need for greater levels of study support but could not see how they could achieve this with Tutor 3 (pure soft) arguing that:

"We don't have time to cover all the academic literacy stuff, that's what learning services are for, we need to focus on the subject".

Nevertheless, others in this group, whilst accepting that their role demands a subject focus, expressed frustration at barriers to higher involvement with study support:

Tutor 13 (applied hard)

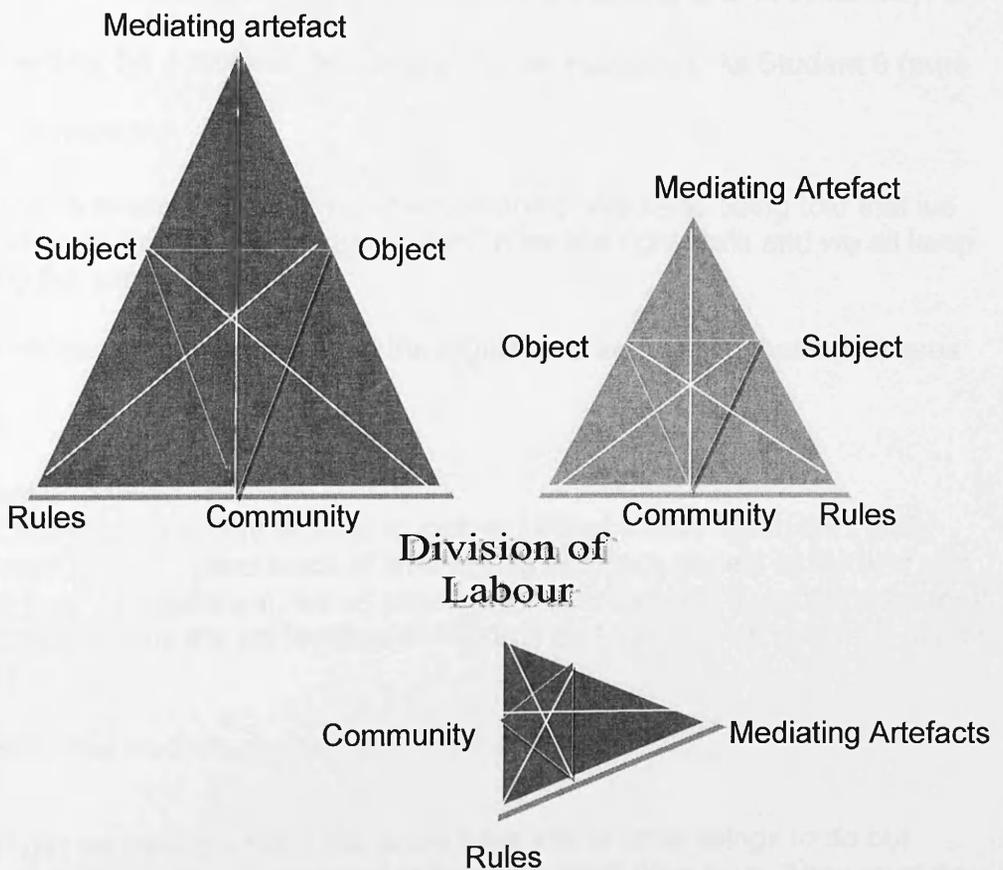
"The pedagogy is being driven by the content, and I would say that the structure of the degree is also being driven by market forces. So, for example, there is an increasing trend towards cutting down the contact hours to be attractive in terms of marketing particular in relation to the part time courses. This doesn't leave us any scope to give the students the level of support that they need".

Conversely, three tutors appeared to see study support as integral to the teaching and learning function and, as a result, elected to contribute more of their time to supporting learners. For these tutors, the inherited systems were not meeting the needs of their students and their response was to adapt their teaching accordingly.

The remaining nine tutors interpreted their role as being more closely related to subject delivery than study support. These tutors talked about wanting to "teach my subject, not teach them how to write a sentence" (Tutor 15, applied hard). However, despite individual expressions of little choice, the variety of response across the tutor groups demonstrates higher levels of autonomy and power than was evident in the student and study support response.

This interaction has been represented in fig 5.6, below which models the intersection of the 'division of labour' node for the three activity systems demonstrating my interpretation of the power differentials expressed. Once again, the academic staff activity triangle is blue, the student activity triangle is green and the triangle to represent study support staff is brown.

Fig 5.6 Interacting Activity System – Division of labour



In this example, the concerns articulated above emerge as a result of confused expectations of teaching and learning in higher education. In this example the tutors appear to exhibit higher levels of power than students and study support staff by having the scope to define their role. Some tutors patently believe that study support is not a function of the teaching role, even where other tutors clearly disagree, for example, Tutor 2 (pure soft)

acknowledged the fact that “tutors need to help students to develop a whole range of higher order skills.” The fact that such disparate views are acknowledged and accepted in the university under study indicates a degree of autonomy with respect to role definition for academic staff.

In contrast to example 2, the students, in this circumstance, appear to feel somewhat disempowered. For some students, this powerlessness appeared to stem from an acceptance of tutor insistence that they are, in some way, ill-equipped for the academic demands of higher education. As Student 9 (pure hard) commented:

“I went to a session about assignment planning. We keep being told that we need to go to these sessions as we don’t have the right skills and we all keep making the same mistakes.”

Other students commented upon the regulations from which these problems arose:

Student 6 (applied soft)

“Well, the tutors are only allowed to look at 10% of a draft which isn’t really that helpful. They spend loads of time writing feedback sheets at the end and by the time we read them, we’ve gone onto a new module. It would be better if they could give us the full feedback on a draft and just give us our mark at final feedback.”

However, this student also commented that:

“ don’t get me wrong, I know the tutors have lots of other things to do but some of them are more interested in their own work than in us. They must be able to see that study support is over-run with students but some of them keep saying that they’re not here to give us academic support they’re here to teach us the subject.”

Nevertheless, these expressions of power, albeit limited, contrast with the absence of any such expressions from study support staff who seemed to have little control over the development of their role with one member of staff noting that:

“It would be nice to do some more advanced stuff, really, but it’s a nightmare, if we didn’t do all the basic things we’d get shot. That’s what everyone thinks we’re here for, the more advanced activities are seen as an optional extra” (Study Support staff member # 11).

The obvious lack of communication between these staff groups serves to entrench these power differentials.

In all, example 3 demonstrates quaternary contradictions around divisions of labour and further examination of these contradictions, once again, reveals entrenched power differentials between academic staff, students and study support staff. From this evidence it would seem that flexibility in interpretation of tutor role serves to enforce a narrow, and disempowering, interpretation for students. As study support staff express their role in terms of needing to respond to tutor autonomy and student dissatisfaction, this staff group appears to have the lowest levels of empowerment across the three participant groups. As such, this contradiction raises questions about power, autonomy and participation.

#### **5.4 Conclusions**

The contradictions discussed here enable some tentative suggestions regarding the ways in which socio-cultural influences impact upon the experiences and expectations of each group.

The student activity analysis illustrates two contradictions. The first of these is generated by tensions between the ways in which students discern the object of study support activity and the mediating artefacts that are designed to enable such activity and the second between the rules of study support activity, which are perceived to be historically derived, and a more diverse emerging student community. Similarly, study support activity illustrates two

contradictions that have been interpreted as having a focus on the object of support staff activity; the first in relation to tensions created when academic regulations are perceived as barriers to achievement of the object aims and the second in relation to tensions between divisions of labour and object aims. In contrast, academic staff activity illustrates only one predominant contradiction relating to tension created when different members of academic staff from the same discipline create vastly differing mediating artefacts.

When considering quaternary contradictions the predominant tensions expressed across all three interview samples relate to three activity system nodes: rules, object and divisions of labour. The first of these indicates power differentials that appear to be hierarchical with academic staff possessing the highest degree of power followed by students who describe a degree of autonomy and study support staff who describe a working life defined by nonnegotiable rules. The 'object' quaternary contradiction also reveals entrenched power differentials between academic staff, students and study support staff. These differentials appear, at times, to benefit the students and at other times, these differentials appear to benefit tutors who describe some levels of autonomy in their response which contrast with the low levels of power described by support staff. Finally, the 'divisions of labour' quaternary contradiction once again, reveals entrenched power differentials between academic staff, students and study support staff with support staff appearing to have the lowest levels of empowerment across the three participant groups

Whilst these contradictions could be viewed separately, the purpose of the next chapter is to use them to address the research questions of this study; in doing so, the particular detail of each of these contradictions is less important

than the overall picture that can be created when these contradictions are viewed in relation to one another. Therefore, the analysis undertaken here will be used, in Chapter Six, to create a number of 'fuzzy generalisations' (Bassey, 1999) that seek to address the research questions outlined in Chapter One.

## **Chapter Six: Discussion**

### **6.1 Introduction**

In order to examine the issues and debates engendered by the previous discussions this chapter is framed by a number of 'fuzzy generalisations' (Bassey, 1999) which aim to address the research questions cited in Chapter One. The first three 'fuzzy generalisations' offer an exploration of the historical, social and material factors that influence the experiences described by each participant group thus addressing the first and second research questions of this study. By focussing on the structural and referential components of experience I am able to analyse both "the combination of features discerned and focussed upon by the subject" (Marton & Pong, 2005:336) and the "particular meaning of an individual object; anything delimited and attended to by subjects" (ibid, 2005:336) and, in doing so, can offer a more critical analysis of the socio-cultural factors impacting upon the variation experienced in each case. Each of the three generalisations relates to a particular participant group.

**Fuzzy Generalisation 1:** The structural and referential components of variation in student experience are predominantly influenced by mediating artefacts.

**Fuzzy Generalisation 2:** The structural and referential components of variation in academic staff experience are predominantly influenced by activity object.

**Fuzzy Generalisation 3:** The structural and referential components of variation in study support staff experience are predominantly influenced by divisions of labour.

A further 'fuzzy generalisation' addresses the third research question analysing how socio-cultural factors impact on power differentials between each group by exploring the power differences associated with the most commonly expressed quaternary contradictions.

**Fuzzy Generalisation 4:** Power differentials between interacting systems are dictated by perceptions of autonomy.

From this, a further three generalisations have been generated around the three constructs explored in the literature chapter; skills focussed study support, learner focussed study support and those forms of study support that focus on the literacy practices of an academic community. The purpose of these generalisations is to examine how the ways in which study support is conceptualised in the literature can be used to understand support mechanisms in this instance therefore extending the analysis of all three of the research questions.

**Fuzzy Generalisation 5:** Skills focussed approaches to study support reveal internal contradictions for each participant group and quaternary contradictions between each participant group.

**Fuzzy Generalisation 6:** Learner focussed approaches to study support reveal internal contradictions for academic staff and quaternary contradiction between academic staff and study support staff.

**Fuzzy Generalisation 7:** Approaches that focus upon the literacy practices of particular academic communities reveal internal contradictions for students and quaternary contradictions between students and study support staff.

I now intend to explore each of these 'fuzzy generalisations' in turn in order to demonstrate my understanding of study support in this context.

### **6.1. Fuzzy Generalisation 1: The structural and referential components of the variation in student experience are predominantly influenced by mediating artefacts.**

Each 'node' of an activity system influences the outcomes of activity which are expressed, in this instance, by the Phenomenographic outcome spaces.

However, as the recipients of study support, the student experience appears to be predominantly influenced by those mediating artefacts created by academic and study support staff in terms of activities and resources designed to support study. As such, whilst both staff groups talked about responding to student demand, this 'demand' was often perceived and estimated rather than negotiated and staff often assumed 'student needs to be identical' (Drew, 2001). In this sense, whilst students held a wide range of beliefs about how study support should be conceptualised the artefacts in evidence often represented a much narrower staff understanding of student need.

More specifically, in terms of referential components, that is "the particular meaning of an individual object" (Marton & Pong, 2005:336), the student outcome space demonstrates a referential hierarchy from skills focussed support, through learner focussed support, to support mechanisms that focus on the literacy practices within the discipline community. Whilst this hierarchy is similar to those relating to staff experiences, the student experiences overwhelmingly focus upon the appropriateness, or otherwise, of the mediating artefacts involved; from generic sessions designed by study support

staff to individual tutorials designed by tutors. Whilst a number of students were grateful recipients of these services, the predominant sense was that the mediating artefacts created by central study support staff demonstrated little genuine knowledge of the 'identity' of the learner (Thorpe, 2002). The lack of student voice in the construction of many of the mediating artefacts served to all but ignore learner-led models of study support (Ivankova & Stick, 2007) and, as a result, served to ignore student object or, indeed, community.

Where study support was experienced as learner-led, or as illustrating an understanding of the identity of particular learners it, again, appeared to be the mediating artefacts that predominantly influenced student experience. Whilst it could be claimed that these experiences were influenced by the object of staff or by the community engaged in the debate, this argument is less persuasive on the many instances where these activities were described as accidental by students or as desirable but 'less important than lectures and seminars' (Fazey & Fazey, 2001) by academic staff. In all, the student referential hierarchy reveals a focus on mediating artefacts and, by corollary, privileges staff perceptions of study support needs over, and above, any notion that "a student's 'basic' study strategy is primarily determined by their perceived control over learning" (Ferla, Valcke and Schuyten, 2009:198). The implication of this, for the university under study, is that a significant financial resource is being put into a service in order to create resources that fail to meet the needs of a significant proportion of students. The fact that the mediating artefacts created by central services represent higher volumes of traditional techniques is of some concern (Peelo, 2002). However, if viewed from a different perspective, identification of this tension could serve to reframe the Widening

Participation agenda as an opportunity to review teaching and learning strategies rather than a problem to be overcome. Furthermore, if, as claimed by Kember et al “despite extensive funding in some quarters, overall, efforts to foster the development of generic attributes appear to have met with limited success” (2007:611) such a review of study support could inform thinking about graduate attributes.

In terms of the structural features of student experience, that is the “combination of features discerned and focussed upon by the subject” (Marton & Pong, 2005:336), mediating artefacts, again, present the greatest influence with respect to whether student responses foregrounded deficit or potential models of study support. This is most evident in student interviews that describe study support in terms of skills focussed study sessions “based on a deficiency model” (Wingate, 2007:391).

It could be argued that by ostensibly removing study support from the teaching and learning function, and investing responsibility for study support with centrally based generic staff, academic staff are free to decide whether it is within their role to “make explicit what a well-developed argument looks like in a written assignment” (Lea & Street, 1998:163), or not. Mediating artefacts of this nature, whether in the form of study support sessions or a lack of attention given to academic literacy by academic staff, potentially create a vicious cycle whereby students are made to feel deficient if they require study support and the service, itself, becomes stigmatised.

In contrast, mediating artefacts that related to interviews that aligned with categories 3 and 4 in the Phenomenographic outcome space served to foreground the potential of students. In fact, whilst it is tempting to argue that

staff object might be the predominant influence in a model of student potential, both category 3 and category 4 relate to experiences that were often described as incidental or generated by peers. Whilst the latter might, once more, indicate a predominance of community influence, the detail of these interviews reveals a greater focus on mediating artefact, in terms of the activity or space to engage, rather than on peers. This focus suggests that these mediating artefacts create opportunities for active participation in the social practice (Wenger, 1999) of academic discourse thus legitimising peripheral participation with the academy.

As such, whilst acknowledging the relative influences of each 'node' within an activity system across the student experiences captured in this instance, 'mediating artefacts' proved to be the most significant activity system feature. Interestingly, a consequence of this interpretation is that, in order to develop academic literacy practices, mediating artefacts require the same level of analysis as the philosophical approach taken. Whilst this may seem to be an obvious claim to make, the literature would suggest that an individual's belief about the purpose of study support, and their enactment of these beliefs, are not always commensurate (Peelo, 2002; Barrie, 2007; Kember et al, 2007, Dhillon et al, 2008). In fact, it is difficult to find studies that explore both the philosophy behind models of study support and the strategies used to implement these philosophies. Lea (2006) and Lea and Street (1998, 2006) are in the minority in this regard, offering a more epistemological approach to notions of study support via the promotion of an academic literacies approach. Indeed, Lea (2006) and Devereux & Wilson (2008) advocate the adoption of an academic literacies approach to course design which would, inevitably,

require an appraisal of the mediating artefacts produced by all members of staff alongside those produced, centrally, by the university. However, given the concern expressed by Harland and Staniforth (2008:669) that “the organisation and work of academic development in higher education is fragmented” it is difficult to see what, or who, would motivate such a wholesale review of practice.

## **6.2. Fuzzy Generalisation 2: The structural and referential components of variation in academic staff experience are predominantly influenced by activity object.**

Whilst, in Chapter 5, I interpreted the primary internal contradiction across the academic staff group to be between mediating artefact and community, academic staff activity, in relation to study support, appears to be primarily influenced by staff object aim, that is, by their personal and changeable intentions and beliefs. It is this object aim that results in the creation of conflicting mediating artefacts across the tutor community. Indeed, it would seem that academic staff, in the university under study, are the only participant group that expressed autonomy in this regard. As such, tutors described hugely differing, and often conflicting, experiences that they believed had supported students with their study.

In terms of referential hierarchy, the tutor outcome space demonstrate a referential hierarchy from support that focussed on generic skills, to support that focussed on subject specific skills, through learner focussed support and support mechanisms that focus on the literacy practices within the discipline. It is worth noting, however, that whilst these referential features bear some resemblance to the features of student interviews, the defining difference lies

in the autonomy demonstrated by staff, enabling them to adopt an approach to study support based upon their own particular beliefs about its function. As such, whilst tutors talked about having to react to student demand or the need to cover a high degree of content or about pressures to ensure that retention rates were improved, they all described study support activities that aligned to their personal beliefs about teaching and learning.

Conversely, despite the reported demands from students a significant number of tutors clearly did not see study support as an aspect of their role, instead, demonstrating a tendency to “to refer students to learning support units rather than addressing students’ academic learning skills themselves” (Tapper & Gruba, 2000:56). In these examples, tutor object aim, rather than university rules, community pressure, divisions of labour or mediating artefact would appear to be the most influential feature of academic staff activity.

However category 1, within which tutors, often reluctantly, described generic sessions on organisation, individual study requirements, use of academic resources and time management contradicts this Fuzzy Generalisation to some extent. Nevertheless, although this category appears to demonstrate a lack of autonomy and little regard for tutor object aim, the fact that only five tutors described such sessions as typical of their practice demonstrates that tutor object aim rather than student demand is driving this aspect of practice. In fact, in deciding to address what is perceived as a student deficit tutors are making an active choice that reveals their beliefs about study support and, thus, their activity object aim.

Likewise, but more obviously, categories 2, 3 and 4 demonstrate tutor intention with regard to study support from generic sessions for all learners in

relation to academic reading to bespoke tutorials that develop learner potential. What is interesting, in these instances, is that tutors “often held different concepts of writing development” (Peelo, 2002) even when working within the same discipline. As such tutor intention, rather than disciplinary community, appeared to drive tutor activity. Indeed, whilst Category 5 was the only category in the referential hierarchy that maintained a predominant focus upon literacy practices of the discipline, and thus, one might expect the predominant influence to come from the ‘community’, once again, tutor object aim took precedence. This is evidenced in the variation of acceptance of this practice; only six of the tutors interviewed described it as typical of their experience which highlights a degree of autonomy and, as a result, the centrality of tutor belief and object aim.

In addition, the structural components of tutor activity, either foregrounding ‘input’ or ‘output’, again demonstrate the predominance of tutor object aim. For instance, categories 1, 2 and 3 relate to experiences described by tutors in terms of a focus on ‘input’; ensuring that students are able to access designated learning activities. In these instances, tutors perceived study support activities as a means by which they could ‘support the educational process’ (Wagner, 1995). However, the fact that a significant number of tutors elected not to address ‘input’ and student access, often revealing a “view of ability as a fixed entity, not modifiable through effort or experience” (Fazey & Fazey, 2001:358) arguably serves to highlight tutor autonomy in this regard. Indeed, those tutors that appeared to view ability as fixed described a desire to encourage some students to accept that higher education isn’t for them. Interestingly, these tutors were careful to talk in more positive terms, in

relation to tutorials described within Category 3, when considering students with a Specific Learning Difficulty. As such, in the case of students with a Specific Learning Difficulty, and only in this respect, tutor object aim was sometimes subordinate to the 'rules' of activity, as enshrined in the Disability Discrimination Act (2005) which was referred to by three tutors.

Conversely, categories 4 and 5 illustrate the influence of tutor object aim which was evidenced by the ways in which tutors justified the experiences that they described. For instance, Category 4, relating to tutorial support designed to improve grades, was only described as a typical example of study support by four tutors and, in each case, tutors talked forcefully about their personal epistemologies and philosophies of teaching rather than department rules or divisions of labour. In this way, such experiences did not appear to be resented or resisted, but, equally, were not mentioned by three quarters of the tutors interviewed.

Likewise, category 5 demonstrates the importance of tutor object aim with some tutors justifying the disciplinary nature of feedback in terms of the fact that they did not "consider themselves teachers at all, instead visualising themselves more as a member of their discipline." (Kember, 1997:255) and others acknowledging the freedom to interpret feedback approaches.

As such, whilst acknowledging the relative influences of each 'node' across the academic staff experiences 'object' aim proved to be the most significant activity system feature. Interestingly, a consequence of this interpretation is that senior managers in universities will need to consider whether the variance that results from tutor autonomy in this regard is appropriate, particularly given the concerns expressed in the literature about the qualitatively different

understandings of the nature of academic writing and graduate attributes (Lea & Street, 1998; Peelo, 2002; Barrie, 2007).

### **6.3. Fuzzy Generalisation 3: The structural and referential components of variation in study support staff experience are predominantly influenced by divisions of labour.**

In contrast to student and tutor experience, study support staff activity is primarily influenced by divisions of labour. More specifically, a lack of autonomy or “voice” in terms of divisions of labour influences the structural and referential aspects of support staff experience even though one might expect this staff group to be the most influential in study support matters.

In terms of referential hierarchy, the support staff outcome space demonstrates a referential hierarchy from support that focussed on information skills, to support that focussed on academic skills, through generic learner focussed support to specific learner focussed support. Additionally, whilst issues relating to divisions of labour impacted on all four categories of description, category 2, relating to academic skills, was almost universally described as a response to low levels of tutor labour and category 3, relating to generic learners, was characterised by descriptions of low levels of student labour.

In fact, three of the six members of support staff that mentioned activities relating to category 2 talked about wanting to do something more developmental which challenges the argument that study support staff “struggle to leave behind assumptions of a mechanistic approach to specific academic tasks, which can encourage limited solutions” (Peelo, 2002:162). Whilst it might be argued that this is the case for some members of support

staff, and indeed some tutors, the expressions of frustration made by others indicate that these assumptions merely illustrate instrumentalism borne of a lack of control over divisions of labour. This influence is most clearly demonstrated in responses characterised by anger at the fact that academic staff are at liberty to “refer students to learning support units rather than addressing students’ academic learning skills themselves” (Tapper & Gruba, 2000:56). It is, perhaps, pertinent that two members of support staff argued that this lack of engagement results in an atomisation of study support activities. Therefore, whilst some authors in this field argue that generic, centrally based, activities produce this atomisation it could be argued that divisions of labour, created, in part, by fluctuating levels of tutor interest, serve to increase the isolation of central services and result in skill atomisation. In this way, whilst concerns are expressed that dislocated study support sessions result in students “learning ideas and concepts separately from each book, or source, rather than integrating and organising the learning material in a coherent way” (Boscolo et al, 2007: 434) the status quo that produces this outcome might suit more academic staff than it frustrates. As such, whether a more empowered body of support staff would continue to offer such sessions is difficult to discern, however, the fact that some members of the group of staff charged with study support in this instance felt disempowered to deliver what they think most students need reflects something of a hierarchical ‘institutional habitus’ (Avramadis & Skidmore, 2004) at the university under study.

Category 3, which relates to support with redrafting failed assignments, highlighted similar concerns relating to student labour with one member of

support staff expressed concern that student expectation of, and frustration with, labour intensive centralised support leave the “conventional goals of higher education learning largely unchallenged” (Haggis, 2006:523).

Interestingly, such conflicts between expectations of divisions of labour are reversed in interviews that align with category 4 which related to support for individuals with a Specific Learning Difficulty. Indeed, whilst it might be natural to expect students with an identified need to require additional labour input, from a dedicated support service, experiences relating to category 4 were described in terms of the amount of work that many students with SpLD were prepared to put in themselves which contrasts with descriptions of the labour that students without an identified SpLD were prepared to accept. This shift served to reposition these students in more equally balanced learning relationships with support advisers despite the fact that students with an identified learning need are often characterised in terms of learning deficit rather than learning potential (Allan, 2008). Whether this anomaly is about expectation of students or staff expertise has not been explored in this thesis however the contrast is worthy of further study.

In terms of structural categories, divisions of labour, once again, dictated whether ‘training’ or ‘development’ was foregrounded in support staff activities. For example, categories 1, 2 and 3, align to descriptions of activity in terms of training students to access the library, acquire academic conventions or develop a writing style. Whilst a number of support staff expressed a desire to do much more than this, the term “training” appeared in more than three quarters of descriptions aligned to these categories alongside discussions about pragmatism and demand. Therefore, whilst it is tempting to conclude

that “skills approach to the enhancement of learning, provided by support services, is based on a deficiency model” (Wingate, 2007:391) the skills training approach in this instance appear to be based upon ill conceived divisions of labour that result in reactive processes. I do not dispute that this results in the portrayal of a deficiency model but I question the assumption that this model is the predominant driver of such a model.

Furthermore, category 4 was described in terms of enabling students with an identified SpLD to develop appropriate academic literacies. In fact whilst this category was characterised by descriptions of high levels of student labour this type of work, that was so often described as ‘specialist’ by academic staff, is deemed to be the primary remit of support staff, resulting in expectations that support staff labour allocation will prioritise such students. Again, whilst this is, perhaps, unsurprising, it does result in a predominant influence of divisions of labour, rather than staff object, community or mediating artefacts. Moreover, whilst university ‘rules’ in terms of academic regulations and policies influence this work, and were cited by a number of support staff, the fact that support for students with SpLD is seen as a specialist role resulted in it being perceived as “natural” that support staff are expected to contribute the highest labour levels.

Interestingly, this category is the only one within which support staff described encouraging students to “work ‘backward’ from their current techniques to see what epistemological and ontological assumptions are informing these practices” (Gamache, 2002: 286) and attempting to work with tutors to reduce systemic barriers to learning albeit without much success. In this context, it is perhaps unsurprising that tutors are reminded of their legal obligations in line

with the Disability Discrimination Act (2005). Nevertheless, the divisions of labour discussed here are “deeply embedded in the structures and divisions that situate academic writing provision in the margins of the academy” (Burke & Hermerschmidt, (2005:346) and, as such, serve to increase the marginalisation of these aspects of the teaching and learning process. In all, whilst acknowledging the relative influences of each ‘node’ on support staff activity across the study support staff experiences ‘divisions of labour’ maintain a predominant impact. A consequence of this influence is that some consideration needs to be given to the role, and definition, of study support in the university under study in order to gain an increased understanding of student-institution interaction (Ozga, 1998, Smith et al 2004; Jacklin & Robinson, 2007).

#### **6.4. Fuzzy Generalisation 4: Power differentials between interacting systems are dictated by perceptions of autonomy.**

The quaternary contradictions discussed in Chapter 5 indicate what I believe to be the power differentials between each system which were based, primarily, upon expressions of powerlessness, or an absence of such expressions, from each participant group

##### *Quaternary Contradiction 1 – ‘rules’*

The first quaternary contradiction, relating to the ‘rules’ of activity, was a source of tension across each participant group and revealed a feeling of powerlessness across the student group. This powerlessness appeared to stem from an espoused ‘mismatch’ between assessment processes and what Ferla, Valcke & Schuyten (2009) described as a student’s model of learning; comprising his/her self-efficacy beliefs, learning conceptions, attributions for

academic performance and assessment expectations. In fact, the lack of synergy, for some students, between assessment practices that preceded higher education and those within it has served to undermine their self-efficacy beliefs and attributions of academic performance; a lack of autonomy with regard to these 'rules' results in a significant degree of disempowerment. However, notwithstanding this, support staff appear to have the least autonomy of all three groups with respect to 'rules' in that whilst students can approach either staff group for advice and guidance, support staff described having little choice about the forms of support that they could offer due to demand for forms of support that meet tutor and student demand. Whilst some members of support staff felt entirely comfortable offering skills based support to failing students in response to 'minimal tutor engagement with academic literacy' (Saltmarsh and Saltmarsh, 2008) all members of this group described their workloads, and work patterns, as being prescribed by the interest, or otherwise, of academic staff and the demands of students. Furthermore, whilst a significant number of this staff group described the 'rules' of assessment practice and study support as challenging for an increasingly diverse student body, they all described their main response to these rules in terms of generalised programmes that take no account of diversity (Thorpe, 2002). It is noticeable that a significant proportion of support staff expressed doubt about these systems yet failed to see how they might shape the institutional habitus. Conversely, as the arbiters of rules and academic regulations, the academic staff possess much more autonomy, and thus more power, than the students or support staff. In fact, whilst a number of tutors described the 'rules' of assessment and study support as requiring some revision they also described

variation in response to these rules demonstrating autonomy of interpretation. Given that “the mainstream lecturers who have set the assessment task are often incapable of making the required literacy norms overt” (Bharuthram & McKenna, 2006:497) and that a “skills approach to the enhancement of learning, provided by support services, is based on a deficiency model” (Wingate, 2007:391) it is unsurprising that the deeply embedded support structures in evidence here do little to empower centralised support staff.

#### *Quaternary Contradiction 2 – ‘object’*

Once again, whilst the second quaternary contradiction proved to be a source of tension for all three participant groups, students perceived themselves to have a significant degree of autonomy with respect to the expression of their object aim. For example, fourteen of the sixteen students described degree completion as the primary object aim of study support and, in contrast to comments made in relation to institutional ‘rules’ these students talked about being willing to complain if this aim was not met. This expression of “perceived control over learning” (Ferla, Valcke & Schuyten 2009:198) appears to have resulted in a perception of autonomy across the student group, whether real or imagined.

In response, both staff groups described an increasing demand, from students, to ensure that this student objective was, at the very least, taken account of. In fact, whilst, in general, academic staff object aim appeared to dictate academic staff activity, this object aim was, on occasion, overshadowed by student demand. In this way, when students chose to express their study support object aim in unequivocal terms, academic staff demonstrated lower levels of autonomy, and therefore lower levels of power,

in their response. That the “institutional relationships of power and authority that surround, and are embedded within, diverse student writing practice across the university” (Lea, & Street, 1998: 157) were challenged in this instance does little to raise the status of study support when the challenge is born of achievement instrumentalism. Indeed, support staff adopted an equally instrumental response to expressions of student object aim by increasing the levels of support on offer. Additionally, despite some members of this group describing a desire to adopt a more developmental approach, none articulated the scope to realise their own object aim deferring, each time, to student demand for success and the familiarity of historically defined models of support.

#### *Quaternary Contradiction 3 – ‘division of labour’*

Although the third quaternary contradiction also revealed tensions between each activity system, in this instance, academic staff demonstrated the highest levels of autonomy in their response. More specifically, the fact that some tutors elected “to refer students to learning support units rather than addressing students’ academic learning skills themselves” (Tapper & Gruba, 2000:56) whilst others appeared to view study support as an aspect of teaching and learning, demonstrates a high degree of autonomy in relation to their own labour. Furthermore, students, in this instance, demonstrated some autonomy in their response to their own perceived support needs. For example, whilst a number of students expressed frustration that tutors were unwilling, or unable, to offer the forms of support that they felt necessary, some described creating mediating artefacts that would enable peer discussion, and debate, not on offer elsewhere. In addition, students with an

identified Specific Learning Difficulty described situations that involved them specifying the support to which they felt entitled. It would seem that a legal entitlement to bespoke support encouraged these students to “expect institutions to pay greater attention to individual, rather than institutional, needs” (Tait, 2000:33). In a commercial climate that repositions the student as ‘client’ (Ball, 2000) learners with Specific Learning Difficulties may be paving the way for all students to challenge the ways in which universities structure, and support, their learning.

In contrast, support staff, once again, demonstrated the lowest levels of autonomy, describing a need to respond to tutor and student demand over, and above, their own beliefs about the forms of support necessary. Whilst it could be argued that support staff are employed to deliver study support and, as such, it is unsurprising that the support staff role is defined by staff and student labour this offers a narrow interpretation of the support staff role.

Indeed, if support departments were to be viewed as the arbiters, rather than the point of delivery, of study support, one might expect a review of such labour divisions. Whether academic staff would be prepared to accept arbitration from a service that has, historically, been positioned on the margins of the academy (Burke & Hermerschmidt, 2005) whose staff have been viewed as having ‘second class intellectual status’ (Rose, 1998) is questionable, however, if the results here were to be replicated across the sector, the need for a reconceptualisation of support is much needed.

In all, the power differentials modelled by each quaternary contradiction reveal perceptions of autonomy across each group. That these perceptions shift is perhaps inevitable, however, the overall lack of autonomy described by

members of support staff serves to question whether centralised support services are, in the words of Brew & Pesata (2004), 'ipso facto a good thing'.

### **6.5. Fuzzy Generalisation 5: Skills focussed approaches to study support reveal internal contradictions for all three participant groups and quaternary contradictions between each participant group.**

#### *Internal Contradictions*

From the interpretations of experience in Chapters 4 and 5, skills focussed approaches to study support appear to produce internal contradictions for all three participant groups in different ways.

In terms of student activity, internal contradictions relating to skills focussed approaches were in evidence for some students between object aim and mediating artefact. Moreover, these contradictions arise from the tension between those students who expressed frustration at an assumed position that all students require a set of generic skills, and those who expressed frustration at being stigmatised for wanting the generic sessions on offer. What adds complexity to this tension is the fact that students with a Specific Learning Difficulty, who do not appear to feel stigmatised by their use of central support services, were not subjected to generic skills based experiences. This difference in approach highlights the

“recognised tension between an institutionally focused service model that could be everything to everyone and one that could be distinguished as more conventionally ‘academic’ with theoretical knowledge as the basis for practice.” (Harland and Staniforth, 2008:671).

Support staff displayed theoretical understanding of the learning styles of those with SpLD referring to learning difference rather than learning deficit and did not cite generic sessions as being an appropriate response; thus learners

with a 'pathologised label' (Allan, 2008) were offered learner-led support and those without this label were predominantly offered skills-led support. Furthermore, in three of the four instances where students saw generic skills focussed sessions as useful the student in question had yet to internalise the skills in question. As such, the concern expressed by Simpson that skills focussed approaches are counter-productive as students "either try to take the advice and struggle with methods that are not actually helpful to them or they ignore the advice and lose confidence in methods that have suited them reasonable well" (2002:135) identifies only part of the problem. These students were not attempting to take advice, rather they appeared to be relying upon what was seen as a service; this behaviour created further internal tensions for the student population as reliance upon this form of support resulted in decreased levels of other forms of developmental support. Similarly, the concerns expressed by some tutors in relation to the skills approaches adopted by their colleagues served to reveal internal contradictions between community and mediating artefact. In addition, some tutors cast doubt upon the academic literacy levels of their colleagues questioning their ability to "make the required literacy norms overt" (Bharuthram & McKenna, 2006:497). In these instances philosophical differences emerged between those that saw study support as skills based, in deficit terms, and those that saw study support as based on the literacy practices of a community. What is interesting, in this regard, is that whilst the former group of tutors had no complaint about colleagues who chose to take an academic literacies approach to their teaching the latter group of tutors described the tutor-led skills approach as serving to undermine the academic

process. In this way, the very existence of mediating artefacts created from a skill focussed perspective was seen as a source of conflict and, where these approaches were advocated by tutors, a source of embarrassment.

Nonetheless, the cited lack of organisation with regard to academic development in higher education (Harland and Staniforth, 2008:669) would suggest that such tensions are difficult to overcome.

In a similar way, the internal contradictions across the study support staff group appear to stem from resentment, expressed by some members of support staff, that generic skills based activities did little to enable students to develop a level of understanding about these processes. Specifically, three members of support staff claimed that such activity served to create a situation whereby students, and tutors, demanded generic support sessions either because this was the norm, or because they felt that centralised support to be incapable of a more integrated notion of learner-focused academic support. In this sense, the point made by Harland and Staniforth (2008:671) that an institutionally focused service model that could be everything to everyone will be anathema to those that prefer a more conventionally 'academic' model, with theoretical knowledge as the basis for practice, would appear to be particularly pertinent in this case.

Additionally, whilst it was difficult to find any literature written by support staff that advocated an academic literacies approach, four members of this staff group acknowledged academic discourse as a social practice and advocated a move towards reconceptualising study support within disciplines. Indeed, this sub-group of staff argued that a significant number of tutors are "often unaware of the extent to which academic literacy is specific to the academy

and that it comprises fairly significant differences across disciplines” (Bharuthram & McKenna, 2006:497). Nevertheless, this opinion was contested by other members of study support staff who had much invested in skills focussed support sessions.

### *Quaternary Contradictions*

On consideration of chapters 4 and 5, the most significant source of quaternary contradiction in relation to skills focussed models of support stem from differences in study support object aim. Specifically, as discussed in Chapter 5, tension is evident between those whose study support object aim aligns with a skills focussed model and those whose object aim indicates a learner focussed or academic literacies approach; that tutors, more than study support staff and students, formed a large part of the latter group is, perhaps, unsurprising. Indeed, whilst some students talked about wanting to develop as a thinker within their discipline, every student identified degree completion as the primary object aim of study support. Likewise, whilst some members of support staff bemoaned the instrumental nature of many of the tasks that they were required to perform, they all identified student retention as the primary object aim of study support. In contrast, whilst tutors also identified retention as one of the object aims of study support, more than half of the tutors interviewed talked about study support as an enhancement of the learning process. Nevertheless, this claim was undermined by the tendency to “refer students to learning support units rather than addressing students’ academic learning skills themselves” (Tapper & Gruba, 2000:56).

This contradiction highlights “an overall confusion about the nature and purposes of institutional learning” (Haggis & Pouget, 2002:331). Whilst it is,

perhaps, unrealistic to suggest that staff and students should have a shared understanding of the purpose of study support, such tensions arise due to the fact that:

‘models used to understand student writing do not adequately take account of the importance of issues of identity and the institutional relationships of power and authority that surround, and are embedded within, diverse student writing practice across the university’ (Lea and Street, 1998:157).

This argument is reflected in the activity system analysis used in this thesis with the institutional relationships of power and authority relating to rules and divisions of labour. Likewise, the diverse writing practices that Lea and Street refer to are contextualised by communities and mediating artefacts and influenced by the object aim of individual actors. As such, the concern expressed by Lea and Street can be used to understand the contradictions between the object aim of each participant group in relation to skills focussed models of support. In this way models of study support that do not adequately take account of the importance of issues of identity, power and authority embedded within study support practices will inevitably result in quaternary contradictions between student and staff populations.

Overall, skills focussed approaches to study support most closely demonstrate, and are ‘framed’ by, the structures and social practices of the university culture (Burke & Hermerschmidt, 2005) and such approaches do little to enable the social, intellectual and personal inclusion of all members of the educational community.

**6.6. Fuzzy Generalisation 6: Learner focussed approaches to study support reveal internal contradictions for academic staff and quaternary contradiction between academic staff and study support staff.**

### *Internal Contradictions*

From the interpretations of experience in Chapters 4 and 5, learner focussed approaches to study support appear to produce internal conflicts for academic staff between mediating artefact and community. However, whilst the location of this contradiction mirrors academic staff conflicts in relation to skills focussed models of support, contradictions surrounding learner focussed models of support are more subtle. Specifically, whilst, for skills focussed models of support, contradictions exist between staff committed to a skills focussed model and staff committed to a learner or academic literacy focussed model, when concentrating on a learner focussed model the contradiction appears to stem from the perception of student potential. For example, whilst some tutors described their intention to understand the “student’s model of learning” (Ferla, Valcke & Schuyten, 2009) the language used demonstrated a ‘deficit’ student construct in need of remediation. Conversely, at least one tutor from each category (pure soft; applied soft; pure hard; applied hard) described wanting to develop ‘student autonomy through high quality teaching’ (Drew, 2001) focussing on student voice and empowerment rather than remediation. Whilst I have interpreted this as a contradiction, in that I view these conflicting philosophies as having the potential to confuse students, the academic staff did not highlight this as a tension in the same way that they highlighted conflicting philosophies with respect to skills focussed models. Whether this means that I have discerned a divergence of philosophies that tutors are unaware of, or whether academic staff can rightly claim that such variation demonstrates a healthy difference in approach, is unclear. However, as so many tutors complained about a lack of

space to discuss such issues this divergence, whether deliberate or unknowing, creates a genuine contradiction. This is not to claim that all contradictions are unwelcome, rather such contradictions can be a useful starting point for the kind of facilitatory dialogue advocated by Avis (2007:165) who suggested that Activity Theory can be used to:

“effectively review institutional processes, seeking to uncover disruptions, contradictions and difficulties that necessitate change in institutional or cross-institutional practices, in other words change in an activity system or cluster of systems”

Given the resistance to change of embedded support practices (Burke & Hermerschmidt, 2005) analysis of activity theory contradictions may be one way of enabling critical review of study support activity. Moreover, whilst I was unable to discern similar contradictions in either student or support staff interviews if it can be argued that we “cannot research learning without researching the human relationship within which it occurs, and the social context within which it is appropriated and used” (Hirst, et al, 2004: 75) then any analysis of study support that ignores the voices of students or support staff will be partial.

Nonetheless, it is my experience that discussions around teaching and learning in higher education, where they exist, are predominantly conducted by, and for, academic staff alone, yet, if we view the literacy practices of academic disciplines as “varied social practices associated with different communities” (Lea and Street, 2006: 368) it is difficult to claim that debate around these should be limited to those employed as tutors. In this way, the internal contradictions discerned across the academic staff participant group reveal a need for more open discussion within which concepts of study

support can be contested and negotiated by staff, and students, as equal partners in academic discourse.

### *Quaternary Contradictions*

In terms of contradictions between interacting activity systems, learner focussed models of study support reveal contradictions around divisions of labour. In particular, the levels of demand from students who arguably “expect institutions to pay greater attention to individual, rather than institutional, needs” (Tait, 2000:33) were openly resisted by some tutors and described as a source of pressure by support staff. In fact, the concern expressed by Peelo that educational problems in an era of mass higher education “cannot be resolved by employing more and more learning support workers to provide individual support” (Peelo, 2002:170) is in evidence here. Support staff openly described an inability to offer the levels of learner-focussed support that they perceived to be required by students; in some cases using this as justification for large group generic sessions.

However, all but two of the students interviewed described a desire for support to be designed around their particular needs as a learner and, in every case, identified their subject tutor as the most appropriate source of such support focussing upon the need to have some acknowledgement of their identity as a learner and on the belief that:

“When the student speaks in class or writes an assignment the teacher, (as an expert in the subject discourse) is in a position to guess the discursive content the students are starting from, sense the intended meaning of their utterances and (taking advantage of the powers of inter-subjective framing) respond in a way which shows the student how to refocus their propositions in line with mainstream usage within the discourse” (Northedge, 2003: 178).

In this instance, whilst some of the tutors interviewed for this study acknowledged the fact that they were well placed to support the students, given their subject knowledge and knowledge of each student as a learner, a significant number stated that they either did not feel able to offer high levels of learner focussed support or that they did not consider this to be a professional priority.

Similarly, four of the tutors interviewed stated that they felt uncomfortable offering high levels of learner focussed support as they did not want to cross professional boundaries, however, it is, perhaps, interesting to note that none of the support staff expressed frustration that tutors were doing too much.

Nevertheless, it would be interesting to see whether professional protectionism would result from increased tutor activity in this regard.

Therefore, once again, an absence of debate around learner focussed models of support, in the university under study, has resulted in contradictions between staff and students around expectations, and experiences, of the level and source of such support; it is anticipated that these contradictions will increase with increasing levels of student diversity.

### **6.7. Fuzzy Generalisation 7: Approaches that focus upon the literacy practices of particular academic communities reveal internal contradictions for students and quaternary contradictions between students and study support staff.**

#### *Internal Contradictions*

Study support approaches that focus upon the literacy practices of particular academic communities reveal internal contradictions for students between community and object aim. In particular, a number of students commented upon the tension between wanting to achieve a degree and wanting to develop as an educational thinker. Interestingly, both sides of this conflict

were, in three cases, expressed by the same student who, in each case, appeared to recognise the juxtaposition between instrumentalism and more liberal notions of learning. However, what is crucial, in these cases, is the fact that those students who expressed a desire for degree completion *and* discipline enculturation did not see these as mutually exclusive. Conversely, students who only mentioned degree completion talked about this object aim in opposition to developing as a disciplinary thinker, or writer. As such, when faced with tutors advocating an academic literacies approach some students fail to see how this would help them to develop the forms of writing necessary for assessment purposes thus, for example:

“when studying for an examination students are often more concerned with learning ideas and concepts separately from each book, or source, rather than integrating and organising the learning material in a coherent way.” (Boscolo et al, 2007: 434)

Whilst it is understandable that students who hold degree completion as their sole object aim are likely to adopt an instrumental approach this should not preclude engagement with an academic literacies approach which would, according to those who advocate it, enhance all forms of academic discourse, including those required for assessment. In fact, those students who saw no conflict between a need for degree completion and a desire to develop discipline specific academic literacy regularly expressed anger towards those of their peers that requested assessment focussed instrumental support recognising that such systems position students as disempowered beneficiaries of learning experiences rather than as independent learners or as partners in their own learning.

As an academic literacies approach views literacy practices as socially constructed and therefore open to challenge, in the right climate, students

could see it as a source of intellectual emancipation which would position staff and students in a more evenly balanced relationship where meaning making could be contested by any member of an academic community despite the fact that staff *may* have a greater knowledge of academic literacy.

However, whilst a small number of students in this study expressed a desire to engage with academic literacy approaches in this way, more than half of the students interviewed rejected such approaches as distracting. Therefore, whether tutors who adopt an academic literacies approach are failing to communicate the value of this form of learning, or whether such approaches lack resonance with the institutional culture (Avramadis & Skidmore, 2004) is difficult to discern. Nonetheless, these approaches produce internal contradictions across a diverse student population many of whom appear to be confused about the purpose of study support.

#### *Quaternary Contradictions*

Approaches to study support that focus upon the literacy practices of particular academic communities reveal quaternary contradictions around the object aim and rules of activity. More specifically, one of the primary assumptions of an academic literacies approach is that in order to understand writing practices, and therefore the forms of support that enable the development of these practices, institutions must relinquish some of the power and authority that dictates student writing (Lea & Street 1998; Hirst et al, 20004; Lea, 2004; Bharuthram & McKenna, 2006; Lea & Street, 2006). In this way, those structures and activities predicated on high levels of institutional control over writing practices may contradict practices based on a belief that the identity of learners, and of the academic culture to which the student aspires, is a

necessary feature of study support. A consequence of this contradiction is that tutors, alone, cannot engender an authentic academic literacies approach without recognising that this approach:

“does not view literacy practices as residing entirely in disciplinary and subject-based communities but examines how literacy practices from other institutions (e.g., government, business, university bureaucracy) are implicated in what students need to learn and do.” (Lea, 2006:370).

However, whilst some of the tutors in question describe this broad notion of literacy, and, indeed all forms of discourse, it would appear that a significant number of these tutors feel constrained by the conflicting object aim of their peers, students and support staff. It could be argued that those members of academic staff who are described, in the literature, as being unable to “make explicit what a well-developed argument looks like in a written assignment” (Lea & Street, 1998:163) indicate an opportunity for university communities to discuss, and contest, the relative merits of “varied social practices associated with different communities” (Lea and Street, 2006: 368). Whether staff who feel insecure about their own understanding of literacy practices would be open to discuss this with colleagues and students is debateable, however, an acknowledgment of the complex nature of academic literacy might be an appropriate precursor to such debate.

Furthermore, a debate of this nature would enable some consideration of the ‘rules’ of study support; an additional source of contradiction in relation to approaches that focus on the literacy practices of academic communities. In fact, in the university under study, approaches to learning, and by extrapolation approaches to study support, that conform to an academic literacy paradigm directly contradict the structures and processes that the university has put into place for study support.

As such, support staff and students who conform to and, indeed, welcome these 'rules' might naturally resist what could be seen as a more challenging approach by students and an approach that threatens job security by support staff. As a result, historical and structural cultures and rules, whilst regularly acknowledged by members of all three participant groups as no longer being fit for purpose, serve to impede attempts to move towards an academic literacies approach to learning and study support.

A corollary of this position is that these entrenched power relationships dictate writing practices. Perhaps, therefore, these structures and 'rules' leave peer-to-peer support as the most likely route through which academic literacy practices might develop. However, whilst peer support strategies often materialise organically it has been argued that "peers are not a replacement for staff tuition" (Drew, 2001:324) and that "a substantial body of knowledge is, by and large, as yet unknown to peers" (Durkin & Main, 2002:31). In addition, a peer-to-peer model would fail to include all members of the discipline community thus emphasising the dividing lines between staff and students. Furthermore, all of the students in this study identified degree completion as the primary object of study support which they did not appear to link to an academic literacies approach.

Nevertheless, I wonder whether amongst a student body increasingly willing to "assume more responsibility for their own professional development, in a rapidly changing world" (Tait, 2000:33) there lies a significant minority who do want to move beyond assignment instrumentalism and demand a more democratic engagement with literacy practices.

## **6.8. Conclusions.**

This chapter has explored a number of 'fuzzy generalisations' Bassey (1999) in order to address the research questions detailed in Chapter One. These relate to the variation of experience of each participant group, the socio-cultural factors that impact upon these experiences, power dynamics between participant groups and the implications of different ways of conceptualising study support.

In terms of variation of experience of study support, student experiences, although varied, are predominantly influenced by mediating artefact, tutor experience are most significantly influenced by activity object and support staff experience by divisions of labour. These experiences produce power dynamics which result in support staff being the least empowered participant group and confusion about the nature and purposes of institutional learning (Haggis & Pouget, 2002).

The constructs of study support evidenced in the literature from those that are largely skills focussed, through those that are learner focussed, to those that have a focus on the literacy practices of an academic community, create internal and quaternary contradictions that raise questions about the institutional habitus (Avramadis & Skidmore, 2004) evidenced here and signify a need for universities to view failure as an institutional concern (Blythman & Orr, 2002).

The following chapter will consider these knowledge claims in more detail and suggest how they might indicate topics for further research.

## Chapter Seven: Concluding thoughts

### 7.1 Introduction

This study has raised a number of issues around study support in higher education. Firstly, the extent to which we theorise study support is seemingly insufficient. Indeed, whilst there are a number of authors addressing this area of higher education, very few articulate the theoretical basis of their thinking or make clear their working assumptions. Interestingly, when authors do articulate a particular epistemological frame, for example those aligned to an academic literacies approach, they situate their work more firmly in the field of teaching and learning in higher education. This distinction is crucial; if academics see study support as a feature of academic life beyond the classroom then the tensions described here are, perhaps, inevitable.

However, if study support is reframed as an aspect of teaching and learning it would, arguably, be subjected to the levels of theorisation currently being applied to other aspects of teaching and learning in higher education.

Furthermore, on undertaking this research I believed that I was researching a *process* as experienced by students, tutors and support staff. However, it appears, from the fuzzy generalisations discussed in Chapter Six, that what is being defined is a *culture* rather than a *process* of study support. For example, where a student accesses and experiences technical support for academic writing it could be argued that, rather than seeking technical support, per se, which is available through manuals, they are seeking access to the institutional academic rubric; the academic culture as espoused and expressed within the university. Likewise, when seeking learner focussed study support, students talk about tutors offering “a higher level of feedback”

from someone who “teaches the course and is a member of the discipline”. Rather than focussing on intellectual development, these comments indicate a desire to enter the academic culture of the discipline. As such, the study skills approach that “assumes that literacy is a set of atomised skills which students have to learn and which are then transferable to other contexts” (Lea & Street, 1998:158) does little to take account of the cultural and contextual components of reading and writing practices in higher education. In addition, conceptualisations of study support that locate the ‘difficulty’ within the student result in the marginalisation of learners and the production of forms of pedagogic communication that are undemocratic and unjust. In this study, this judgment applies to skills focussed models of support and some learner focussed models of support which presents a somewhat bleak view of study support in this instance. Indeed, whilst some members of staff, and a small number of students, expressed a desire to adopt an academic literacies approach, historically defined structures and power differentials inhibit progress in this regard. Thus, I believe that, in the university under study, a lack of debate around the definition, and purpose, of study support has served to increase tensions between tutors, support staff and students.

## **7.2 Knowledge claims**

It is, perhaps, worthy of note that three of the ‘fuzzy generalisations’, in this case, contended that student activity was predominantly influenced by mediating artefact, tutor activity by object aim and support staff activity by divisions of labour. These conclusions represent a power hierarchy within which tutor object dictates mediating artefact produced by academic staff and

that these, in turn, shape divisions of labour which determine mediating artefacts produced by support staff.

Furthermore, skills focussed approaches to study support reveal internal contradictions for each participant group and quaternary contradictions between each participant group; learner focussed approaches to study support reveal internal contradictions for academic staff and quaternary contradiction between academic staff and study support staff and; approaches that focus upon the literacy practices of particular academic communities reveal internal contradictions for students and quaternary contradictions between students and study support staff.

### ***7.2.1 The strengths and limitations of this study***

I hope that this study has shown that a systematic, small scale study in one university can provide useful information about how each participant group experiences study support and how variation in this experience can be understood in terms of the social and cultural context of the university under study. That each group holds assumptions about the role of other groups is evident in this case and, perhaps, indicates a fractured study support culture in the university under study.

Whilst I accept that comparing data across two or three higher education institutions would have increased any claims to generalisability, a study of this length would have resulted in superficial analysis of each case. In addition, researching my own practice has been both a strength, and a weakness, of this study. In positive terms, I have had access to both staff and students and have been able to present my results to them as part of the ordinary life of the university which has resulted in debate, at the university under study, about

the issues discussed here; colleagues, and managers, have invited review of these results, to which students have been invited, and useful discussions are underway. However, researching my own practice has created ethical challenges, as discussed in Chapter Three, which I continue to face as this research becomes more public. These relate to embedded power hierarchies discussed earlier and varying sensitivities amongst staff and students.

In addition, testing the data gathered in this instance against the constructs that exist in the literature, has enabled some analysis of the field. Specifically, low levels of theorisation in the literature around study support, much of which describes practice from a single perspective in order to make particular claims, served to reduce the levels of analysis associated with the fifth, sixth and seventh generalisations discussed in Chapter Six; whilst I was able to analyse the impact of skills focussed, learner focussed and literacy practice focussed models, the lack of more widely theorised frameworks frustrated my desire to analyse these forms of study support in greater detail. For instance, given the length of this thesis I was unable to explore the relationship between study support and social learning theory in sufficient detail or draw upon much of the research around teaching and learning in higher education as this field all but ignores study support practices.

### ***7.2.2. Combining Activity Theory and Phenomenography***

Perhaps due to the ontological compatibility between the two methodologies, a number of studies have combined Phenomenography and Activity Theory (Åberg-Bengtsson, 1998; Gordon & Nicholas, 2002; Alsop & Tompsett, 2004; Ben-Ari et al, 2004). However, the claim to ontological compatibility might induce a novice researcher, like myself, to ignore useful differences between

these approaches. For example, one could say that whilst Activity Theory, as it is normally used, offers a view of an experience as seen from the outside; Phenomenography, on the other hand, could be described as offering an internal view of the same experience. Whilst I believe these contrasting views to be useful, I must also recognise that this difference means that the Activity Theory researcher would, usually, supplement interviews with observations (Ben-Ari et al, 2004). However, I had a particular desire, in this study, to explore ontologically compatible ways to examine one data set; I wanted to test my own interpretation of what the data could tell me. As such, I must accept that the Activity Theory analyses may have been better informed by using additional data collection techniques but that this would have prevented my aim of comparing ways of interpreting the same data as Phenomenography precludes observations as they do not allow access to the 'lifeworld' of the participant.

Nevertheless, an examination of activity systems, conducted by focussing on variation in experience, has enabled me to discern the complexity inherent in the relationships between activity systems and thus glimpse the intricacies of this aspect of the teaching-learning function. Some recognition of the fact that each participant group is bound up in multiple activities and that these are relational enhances my understanding of relations within, and between, actors and the influence that this has on individual practices.

In all, I would suggest that the methodological choices made, in this instance, are justifiable as an attempt to present multiple perspectives and interpretations (Buchanan, 2003) of the same data set. I also believe that Scalar Analysis has enabled a useful degree of reflection upon power

relations. Whilst reflection of this nature would not require the use of Scalar Analysis, I believe that the processes of modelling, and testing, perceived power differentials sharpened my thinking. In fact, a number of Scalar models were developed across this study and tested against the data before those represented here were selected. As before, the usefulness of this technique relates to the way in which the data can be used to test heuristic devices of this nature. In this way, instead of being a way to reflect my interpretation of the data the Activity System diagrams became a contestable model of this interpretation that required justification. I believe this distinction to be crucial if I am to offer anything new to the field.

### **7.3 Future research**

This study highlights a number of future research projects that I believe are worthy of further study.

Firstly, given the low levels of theorisation in the literature around study support this data could be tested against some of the theoretical frames used in the teaching and learning literature. For example, in lieu of clearly debated theoretical frameworks for understanding the function of study support in higher education, Bernstein's (2000) framework for conceptualising curricula could be adapted as the theoretical framework for an examination of this data. In this way, Bernstein's thinking around the ways in which different forms of selecting and putting curricular knowledge together produces different identities and relations in pedagogic contexts could be used to understand the experiences detailed here. This model would allow conceptualisation of the impact of the ways in which study support activities are selected, and enacted, in the higher education context.

In addition, it would seem that data of this nature could be used to further reconceptualise literacy support practices in higher education in order to increase our understanding of the ways in which we enable students to access academia and develop their own academic voice.

Finally, more detailed comparison of the experiences of learners with an identified need and those without, perhaps in relation to social learning theory, may enable deeper understanding of the micro-politics of study support.

#### **7.4 Concluding thoughts**

The substantive conclusions of this thesis indicate that those models of study support that locate the difficulty within the learner create tension, dislocate support activities from the learning process, act as a barrier to inclusion and impact negatively upon the self esteem of students. A lack of clarity, in the literature, about the nature of study support and the role of academic literacy in the teaching and learning function serve to obfuscate the deficit and inequitable nature of many forms of study support which deserve much more rigorous challenge.

Personally, I regret not having selected a theoretical framework from the teaching and learning literature against which I could test the concepts and discussions generated here; it is difficult to claim that the literature is under theorised when you have fallen into the same empirical trap. Nevertheless, this experience has been salutary as it highlights areas for future exploration.

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