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SUPPORTING EU, HOME AND FOREIGN STUDENTS IN LONDON WRITING FINAL YEAR UNDERGRADUATE BA ENGLISH LANGUAGE STUDIES DISSERTATIONS

Abstract

The London Metropolitan University BA English Language Studies degree (BA ELS) attracts more than 50% "non-traditional" entrants, including many with English as a second language. This paper reports on challenges of the compulsory third year Undergraduate Dissertation, and on implementing and evaluating interventions to help students meet these challenges.

My colleague and I carried out pre- and post-module surveys of student perception and made use of an ongoing student diary from one student to determine student needs and experiences. We discovered that students find structuring their literature reviews challenging and need to be trained to see the applicability of some of the literature to their particular thesis situations. There is evidence that students in European institutions face similar challenges.

Our action research was informed by a constructivist, dialogic, pedagogic approach which, importantly, included supporting students' writing from within their subject area. In attempting to find solutions to these problems, we were influenced by the academic literacies with its emphasis on learner differences, but more by the genre approach.

I argue that existing manuals on research Dissertations, which focus largely on topic choice, storage of notes and may need to give higher priority to structuring the literature review. Our report includes a survey of students' attitudes and expectations regarding the Dissertation, then moves on to describe and assess changes which were made to the Dissertation in the Degree in question. The greatest focus is on the "literature review", but we also describe changes to the module documentation (Handbook), changes to the Dissertation structure, to the process of choice of Dissertation topic, and attention to students' time management.

1. Introduction

This paper reports on an aspect of action research with final year BA English Language Studies (BA ELS) students completing compulsory Undergraduate Dissertations (or Research Projects, as some prefer to call them) in a "new" university in the UK. "New" universities in the UK mainly derive from former polytechnics or teacher training institutions. These were mostly designated universities in 1992 as a consequence of the government's drive to increase the percentage of 18 year-olds entering Higher Education to 30%. The government target later became 50% of 18-30 year-olds to be in Higher Education by 2010 (England Department for Education and Skills, 2003: 57). This is often termed "the widening participation scenario". Among the "new" universities ours is not alone in having a diversity of student backgrounds: non-native and native speakers, a high percentage (around 20% on our degree) of dyslexic students, students with family commitments and those who work around 20 hours per week. Furthermore, the so-called "native speakers" often have scant knowledge of the genres which they must use in academia (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000). At the Foreign Language Opportunities in Writing (FLOW) conference in September 2009 Professor Jan Zalewski addressed to a similar situation in Poland, where an increasing number of school students across the whole social spectrum pass their *Matura*, leading to entitlement to enter Polish universities and a need for academic writing tuition. However, a difference between Poland and the UK is that in London 200 languages are spoken, so that many more of the Undergraduates are completing degrees in their second language. Some of these are from the EU, including Poland; others are those to whom asylum has been granted in the UK, and yet more come from various countries around the world.

In BA Degrees students in the UK typically study 180 European credit transfer (ECT) points over 3 years, split into 24 modules in an Undergraduate's career, principally assessed by essays, reports and practical tasks. By the time they arrive at their 3rd Year our Undergraduate BA English Language Studies students are used to searching for literature to complete a range of well designed writing tasks, mainly essays, but some with an element of independently chosen text analysis. The Dissertation provides them with the opportunity to write on a task which they design themselves in conjunction with their tutors. When my colleague and I took over the teaching of the Undergraduate Dissertation module in 2007, we were working against a background of a high degree of fluidity in the student body. Approximately 20% of the students in the Second or Third Year BA ELS had transferred from other London- or European-based universities during the course of their degree, or simply changed degree

internally, all these factors making some sort of intervention desirable. We found that though most of the students completed on time, there were common deficiencies such as topics being too broad. There was also a strong tendency for literature reviews to be insufficiently critical, and long-winded. Although International and EU students made more morphological errors in their work than students educated in the UK, challenges of structure and criticality occurred across native and non-native speakers. This situation coincided with development of the Dissertation within our department. We did not undertake the development of the module merely because of a perceived problem but out of a desire to improve our pedagogy. Also the opportunity for funding as one of a series of pedagogic research projects in university writing arose between 2008 and 2009 in the form of support from a UK government funded "Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning" entitled *WriteNow*.

Not all degrees in the UK have a compulsory Dissertation. Some academics have avoided the inclusion of an Undergraduate Dissertation in the current widening participation scenario, as their students struggled to find a topic upon which to write a large number of words. Yet, where compulsory Undergraduate Dissertations do exist, these occupy a very important place in the students' final year of study, commanding around one eighth of the marks towards students' degree classification.

Producing a Dissertation of between 4,500 – 5000 words in one semester (for BA Joint Honours) or up to 12,000 words in two semesters (for BA Single Honours) is likely to be the most challenging task that Undergraduates will have faced. Today the majority of students in the UK write assessed essays in their second year of between 2000 and 3500 words. However, Jennifer Rowley and Frances Slack (2004) are rash to claim that the uniqueness of Undergraduate Dissertations has partially disappeared with the move from examinations to coursework. There is a marked difference between students writing to a range of set titles on topics dealt with within lessons and choosing and structuring a Dissertation.

There have been many articles dealing with student writing in general at universities in the UK. Mary Lea and Brian Street (1999) in particular, emphasise the need to focus on developing writing skills *throughout* a student's academic career, as written tasks and practices change. There have also been a number of articles dealing with the writing of Postgraduate Dissertations, e.g. Huang Rong, (2007) and Marian Woolhouse (2002). However, little can be extrapolated from research on Postgraduate research Dissertations of relevance to the Undergraduate situation. Yet there are far fewer reports about the writing of Undergraduate ones. The exceptions are those of Sandra Acker and Tim Hills (1994), Frank Webster, David Pepper, and Alan Jenkins (2000) and Jennifer

Rowley and Frances Slack (2004), Some reports available from other countries in the EU note challenges of the Dissertation, for example Pietro Boscolo and colleagues (2007) report that Italian Psychology Degree students beginning such work were unfamiliar with writing a critical literature review, and that assistance was required.

2. Background literature

Like Mary Lea and Brian Street (1998 and 1999) and Lillis (2003) we see forms of academic writing as social practice. Subject area writing conventions such as those of History or Linguistics need to be laid bare to students as practices of an academic community with which they are not familiar. However, we part company from the extreme supporters of this "academic literacies approach" where they encourage students to break with convention, for example, in advocating that students be allowed to present Project work in a *Viva* instead of as a Dissertation (Symonds, 2008). We believe that it is useful for the vast majority of students to master the type of *written* Dissertation appropriate to their subject area. Hence the usefulness of the genre approach (Swales and Feak, 2000) where writing is seen as being classified into types such as essays, reports, book reviews and the Dissertation, each with its typical moves**.** This approach needs of course to be applied to subject areas, which are now researchable through databases (Swales and Feak, 2000; Hyland, 2004). There should be a process of critical reading and students should be able to discern invalid or thinly supported arguments. A Dissertation may involve some primary research, thereby adding, if relatively modestly, to the sum of knowledge in an area.

3. The teaching situation

When the current module tutors assumed responsibility for the Dissertation Modules, students received six hours' class tuition at the beginning of the first semester covering:
- an introduction to the purpose of the Dissertation and choice of Dissertation topics;
- an introduction to research methods;
- a workshop with the Subject Librarian on literature search.

Students were required to submit a Dissertation Proposal Form by Week 4 of the semester. Long Dissertations (9500 – 10,000 words) worth 15 ECT credits of Single Honours students were completed in two semesters and shorter

Dissertations of Joint Honours (4500 words) worth 7 ECT 1/2 credits half that time.

After the initial class sessions students were entitled to five half hour sessions tutorial support spread across a semester, the onus being on them to make tutorial appointments with their supervisor.

Each semester had an intake of approximately 12 Single Honours students and 15 Joint Honours students. Students transferring to us in their 3rd Year had not had the opportunity to experience introductory work on critical reading and organisation of essay-writing delivered to First Year Degree students. Some students with English as a Second Language had followed a different route through the degree and had also missed this intervention.

4. The research

The funded research was conceived of as a year-long piece of action research, the cycle beginning in September 08. There was a review in March 09, and the cycle was to end in September 09 with another review. Thus two cohorts of Double Dissertation students and two cohorts of Single Dissertation students were invited to take part, a total of 48 students in all. However, long before that, we had been keeping fieldnotes.

We attempted to design a balanced enquiry covering our perceptions of the module and those of the students of the processes they were going through. A pre-course and a post-course questionnaire were designed containing a mix of quantitative items and qualitative ones designed to elicit deeper responses (Bell, 2005; Norton, 2009). A student assistant also conducted a tiny sample of qualitative interviews before and after the Dissertation module on our behalf. A volunteer was sought to write a learning log about her experiences during the Dissertation module. Response to the post-Dissertation questionnaires delivered in February 2009 to personal email addresses of 13 students who had just received the results of their Double Dissertation was 100%. Lin Norton (2009) cautions against laying too great a value upon student responses to questionnaires. However, the responses triangulated well with the interviews. Students in this group had nothing to lose by giving their honest perceptions to the post-module questionnaire. Our field notes kept during the period were also used. Written permission was obtained from students to use anonymised questionnaire responses and interview scripts for the purposes of data analysis.

Based on our experience recorded in our field notes and from analysing previous Dissertations, we performed a thematic analysis. The principal

demands and weaknesses of the Dissertation seemed to us to be fourfold, centring on:

- Dissertation topic choice,
- time and self-management,
- argument structure in the literature review
- being critical within the literature review.

The first question of our pre-Dissertation questionnaire asked students if they had any prior experience of research. All respondents were novices except one who had completed a UK Sociology school-leaving exam.

Many students experienced positive feelings about doing a research Dissertation on their own such as "curiosity", "anticipation" and "interest". However, about half the students reported negative feelings such as "uncertainty", "confusion" or "anxiety"; especially with regard to choosing and defining their Dissertation area, hardly a desirable situation.

Students were as worried about time management, as were we. Our concern, as evidenced by tutorial attendance, was that many Double Dissertation students completed the Dissertation Proposal around Week 4 of the semester, as required, but then stopped their literature research in order to work on other timetabled modules with more pressing deadlines, resuming work on their Dissertations only towards the end of the designated period, i.e. late in the second semester of the module.

Student A's voluntary "Dissertation Log" illustrates how some students, particularly but not exclusively those who were dyslexic, failed to make progress with their reading lists and reading. Student A had submitted a proposal to analyse some Trinidadian lyrics. She did not recognise the relevance of her previous reading material on style and sociolinguistics from Level 1 and 2 modules. At the end of week 7, she was still thinking about changing her topic completely. Her search for relevant reading was too narrow, focusing only on Trinidadian music. Although generally confident in approaching tutors, she did not consult us between week 4 and week 10 of this module. This example is not as extreme as it may seem. Our field notes show that recognising what reading material could be relevant and making links with what had been studied before was a recurrent problem (cf. John Swales and Mary Feak, 2000).

Students declared other difficulties which corresponded largely to our perceptions of their weak areas and to those difficulties reported in the literature. These concerned: finding and comparing sources, followed by the organisation of the literature review. An illustration is how a student describing the linguistic behaviour of British migrants to Spain could organise writing about both sociological and linguistic aspects. Additionally, a quarter of the respondents

stated that they had been aware before they started that it would be difficult to fit the work into the time available.

In answer to the question about how the module teaching could be improved, students made suggestions of a fairly general nature, including more tutorials and viewing more sample Dissertations. The viewing of sample Dissertations fitted in with our leaning towards the genre approach and how we did this will be described below. Obviously more time could not be allocated to the Dissertation and indeed students did not always attend the tutorials offered.

Students were asked if it might be helpful to have a student mentor who had already completed their Dissertation. Again they were sharply divided, "Yes, because they have gone through the same experience as us", and "No, I wouldn't like to trust another student". This again is something which we will consider for the future, as a student mentor system does exist within the university.

5. Changes to the Module and Teaching

The following changes were made at various moments in the cycle, some in Autumn 2008, some in February 2009.

5.1. Dissertation type and choice of topic

In 2007 we had taken the step of moving away from a 'long literature review' Dissertation format of:
- Introduction
- Secondary sources evaluated
- Conclusion

to create an opportunity for students to undertake a piece of primary research such as a first hand case study or text analysis in an area they had read about. The recommended structure of the final Dissertation became:
- introduction and research situation
- literature review
- methodology and ethics,
- methods of analysis, data collection, analysis of the data,
- conclusions and discussions.

This was interesting for the students, at the same time shortening the word count of the literature review.

The notion that students should engage in "deep learning" goes back over twenty-five years in UK education. Ference Marton, Dai Hounsell and Noel

Entwistle (1984) emphasise "deep learning" with criticality. This deep approach involves an internal transformation based on the processing and reformulation of knowledge, rather than the regurgitation of existing knowledge. Therefore, it is important to encourage students to work in a way that will lead to this. By encouraging students to tackle topics which in many cases related to aspects of their lives, such as a Polish-born student first reading about ESOL teaching and Polish immigration, then writing an observational study of a Polish-speaking child learning English in a London primary school, we were facilitating such a reflective approach.

Even so, more guidance in narrowing down students' Dissertation topics was necessary. We therefore increased class workshop tuition from six to eight hours at the beginning of the module to allow more refining of Dissertation topics and initial assistance with reading lists, reducing later tutorial time.

Choosing and narrowing down the topic area are aspects of Undergraduate Dissertation writing covered in many manuals, e.g. in that of Judith Bell (2005); Nicholas Walliman (2004). We decided to explain how a topic area might be narrowed down according to four parameters: geographic space, period of time and academic school of thought. Drawing on our knowledge of learning styles theory, as recounted in Heather Fry, Steve Ketteridge and Stephanie Marshall (2008), we tried to cater to some extent by using diagrams for students who prefer visual presentation of information rather than a reliance on continuous spoken or written text.

We now showed this narrowing down of Dissertation topics visually in the Dissertation Handbook.

Precise topic
Precise setting
Precise dates
Precise Group of participants/texts to be studied

Some of the extra class time was used so that groups of students could what they found to be challenging aspects of each of their titles. Other students were remarkably realistic in spotting unachievable "dream projects" such as interviewing students in Nigeria about their attitude to Yoruba. This was an effective way of trimming topics and titles down to manageable amounts without damping students' enthusiasm.

5.2. Documentation

The on-line module Handbook is the student's first point of reference for guidance about purpose, content and grading of any module. This is especially important in case students miss one of the initial teaching sessions. We upgraded this, making the language more interactive and less legalistic, reduced it in length using bullet points and some diagrams. Addressing the students' lack of confidence and confusion, we inserted many examples of student decisions and choices.

Web learn holds an on-line bank of materials from lectures and seminars for students to refer back to or print off, if they are absent. We provided a basic alphabetic glossary of research-related vocabulary on the module, which was just as useful for our native speakers as for our EU and International students.

5.3. Time Management and Self-Management

The time management challenge was much greater for the students of Single Honours who had to do the longer Dissertation over two semesters than for the Joint Honours students with the shorter 4,500 word Dissertation. To tackle this time challenge we issued our students with a calendar of suggested "milestones" against which they could map their progress, showing how the final three weeks of time for the two semester-long 9,500 word long Dissertations ideally needed to be available for editing and proofreading. The students were then asked to give provisional dates for completion of each item of their proposed reading and for their practical research. The continuing search throughout the Dissertation for literature and eventual modification of reading lists was shown diagrammatically in the Module Handbook.

Similar experiences to those of Student A (above) led us to proactively contact students deemed as high risk who did not appear for tutorials. Tutorial advice was handled by email when mitigating circumstances such as family illness meant students could not attend face to face.

In order that students should have ownership of their targets, students and tutors jointly filled in a *pro forma* record of short and long term targets agreed at the end of each tutorial.

In the post-module questionnaire, half of the students showed keen interest in the idea of using *Web learn* as a means of communication to save them time rather than simply as a bank of teaching materials, so we set up a *Web learn* "discussion thread" for the Dissertation cohort in March 2009, but

disappointingly, it was little used, perhaps because students in each small cohort met face to face in a taught module each week.

5.4. Approaching the Literature Review

5.4.1. Refining Reading Lists

Students were given greater assistance with their literature searches. Upon submission of their title and initial reading list four weeks into the module, we advised them if the list produced was too narrow or broad. Lists were laid open to the scrutiny of student colleagues. Most students needed guided practice in using the various on-line article search engines, not merely a single demonstration of each by a librarian. Otherwise they tended to revert to *Google* searches, subsequently complaining that there was a fee for downloading the articles. The search demonstration and workshop was now held in a computer room so that each student could apply the search methods demonstrated. The extra teaching session held in the fifth week of the module gave students the opportunity to report how successful some of their searches had been.

Students with topics where there was apparently less material available were then encouraged to make an individual appointment with the librarian in order to expand their reading lists.

5.4.2. Structuring the Literature Review

Although there is no compulsion to review the literature within a single section of the Dissertation (it could be spread out in chapters of findings), the "single section structure" is a safe way for the novice to handle it. The literature review, assuming that one is done, can be claimed to be by far the most difficult aspect of writing a Dissertation. John Swales and Christine Feak (2000), referring to postgraduates, have noticed, as we did, that student literature reviews are often little more than an uncritical account of the field. It is, therefore on the literature review that we chose to focus most of our pedagogic efforts since the twin challenges of structure and criticality came to a head there. The advice manuals then available seemed to concentrate upon types of enquiry, research methods, and keeping and organising records. For example, Judith Bell's book "Doing Your Research Project" (2005) which then served as our students' manual, unfortunately only states a literature review should provide the reader with a brief idea of current knowledge and major themes within the subject area of the

research. Students are advised to find categories within the research literature and to note them (Bell, 2005, p. 21). This is of little help to those with various different sub-topics who are having trouble sorting them out such as the student mentioned above who was writing about British people in Spain**.**

Unlike with several academic sub-genres such as the ''introduction'' or the ''abstract'', there is no single ''architecture'' for the literature review. It will depend on the ideas which the student groups together (Swales and Feak, 2000: 118-124). Both John Swales and Christine Feak (ibid), and Chris Hart (1995), though writing for Postgraduate students outside our subject area, provide the helpful suggestion of giving students practice sets of article abstracts to discuss potential arrangement into clusters, which is a procedure we successfully tried. Before this, students would often write about each book or article they had read, separately, leading to considerable overlap in information. We therefore gave our students a template for a description or an argument as we had done with our first years in our essay writing support

Based on the genre approach, several invented, abridged Undergraduate literature reviews were made available on the module's *Web learn* site*,* with colour coding for various items such as sections, links between sections, and citation style. It was important to us that the sample literature reviews be as different from each other as possible to avoid the risk of students thinking that there is only one way of writing one.

We also played ''puzzle games'' by showing students excerpts of Dissertations and asking them to deduce what section they might stem from, giving linguistic and subject evidence for their suggestions. Groups of students were provided with the opportunity to order sections of a sample literature review, to compare their solution with the original, to give reasons.

Another thing we did was to show students articles which ourselves had written. They were fascinated to hear how our own work had to go through several drafts and a great deal of editing.

5.4.3. Reading and Criticality

Students were given brief exercises in critical reading (following on from those covered in the First Year of the Degree), involving them in criticising and synthesising sources. Using a template, they were invited to consider the discipline, period and school from which writers stemmed, and what degree of evidence the authors gave for their view.

Though taking a critical approach to the literature concerns much more than linguistic ways of citing, it is still useful to point out to students how a method of

citation shows one's attitude to the text read and how much citation might be appropriate. Ken Hyland (2004) makes observations on the high degree of that citation and evaluation of previous experts in the field in research articles in the Humanities and Social Sciences, including Applied Linguistics and we felt that our students should know about this. On the other hand, there were students who joined us, especially those from Law Degrees, whom we had to warn against using too many direct quotations. Hyland (2000) provides an account of ways of citing (direct and indirect; critical and neutral etc) including the verbs most commonly applied in Applied Linguistics and Sociology, the two epistemological areas most closely allied with English Language Studies, which was also the kind of thing we could show to all our students, first or second language speakers.

6. Evaluation of pedagogic changes

Results of Dissertations improved. However, results may vary annually and will depend on many factors, including the commitment of the cohort of students.

Students' style was not always better, but the overall structure of their work mattered far more. They produced interesting work and were often pleased with the discoveries they made about local groups of people and their linguistic attitudes. In one or two cases they were able to go on to publish a shorter version of their study in a local newspaper.

Student evaluation of pedagogies used was very positive. In the post-module questionnaire, students were asked to rate the support given. Nearly all students were complimentary about support given. One self-doubting international student was particularly grateful:

> Had it not been for my tutor's constant reminder that I could do the Dissertation
> and the fact that he kept me on track, I would not have made the effort to even
> show it to him. It's sad that some people are too embarrassed to show their work
> for fear that it may be too inferior compared to other people's. [sic]

With regard to blended learning, several students mentioned the module's initial workshop summaries on *Web learn* as essential. One of the students whose personal circumstances made it difficult to come physically to the university who was tutored almost exclusively by email reported this as the best feature of tuition. This is something we are continuing and extending.

With regard to potential improvements to the learning and teaching situation several students said they would have preferred to be forced to have an internal

deadline of handing half the work in at the end of the first semester, something we are now trialling.

When asked if the Dissertations should have been started at the end of the Second Year rather than the beginning of the Third, all the students stated a preference for this. This is something we will look into for the future. Some students particularly mentioned that all should be warned about the competition for time between the Dissertation and work for other Third Year Undergraduate modules, something which those starting their second semester can inform newcomers of.

Most students felt that they had acquired research and critical reading skills useful for a future professional career or a Masters and that they had learned to manage their time in a way that would be useful to them for their career.

7. Conclusions

Against the widening participation scenario I have demonstrated how the Dissertation was made interesting for students by giving them the opportunity to undertake a short research project. I have argued for a regeneration of the Dissertation module handbook to take into account visual learning styles. Our solutions regarding time management: the time line and an intermediate deadline, will remain for students to accept or reject as they students take steps towards independence. As regards the genre scaffolding exercises offered leading from deep knowledge creation to the writing a critical literature review, it is unlikely that all students would need such detailed guidance as that provided. However, these exercises do serve to demystify the genre probable to a large proportion of "non-traditional" students in a constantly changing student population. For those tutors who feel inadequate to set these up, members of university-wide Writing Support Units are often in place to assist them.

I hope that the arrangements and procedures which I have described strike the balance between being technical and intellectually challenging.
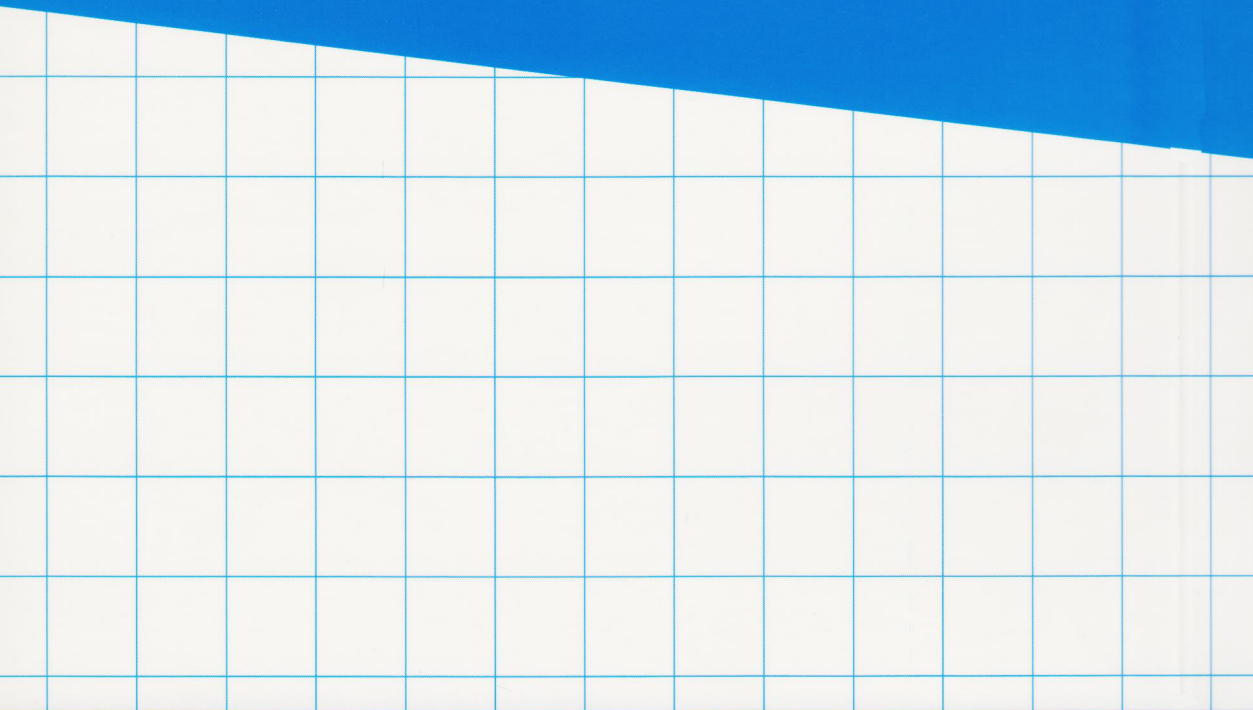
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