**Anxiety and Academic Writing**

**Why are students so anxious about writing?**

Academic writing is a necessary, ever present ‘thing’, in students’ lives, which they often, not surprisingly, feel positively and negatively emotional about. This is because academic writing practices and conventions are one of the principle means by which the academy produces, defines and polices itself as a distinct and privileged social institution. For this reason, higher education is a domain saturated in very particular, ‘high-stakes’ academic writing practices for students (and of course for staff, although they are not the focus of this chapter). Indeed, writing constitutes the primary means by which students, across all disciplines, present their learning and understanding in higher education and how they are most often assessed on that learning and understanding by the subject-specialist lecturers who mark their work. The personal stakes around academic writing in higher education are, therefore, high for students who have a lot invested in doing well at university. They are very aware that a failure to produce appropriate academic writing will be detrimental to their academic achievement. For this reason it is not surprising that producing academic writing involves and evokes strong emotions in students.

The approach to academic writing development explored in this chapter focuses on the affective domain. It suggests that lecturers should explore, through a series of structured activities, how students feel about writing and it moves the discussion about academic writing away from the view that it is just about getting a technical skill set right. Rather, it concentrates on the importance of academic writing as a medium for the development of thinking and ideas within a community of disciplinary-based learning in higher education. For subject-specific lecturers it helps reposition students as active and agentic around their development as academic writers and thinkers. It argues that students should be encouraged to think of their writing as an integral part of their academic identity, which draws on their whole-life experiences of writing for academic purposes. To this end it argues that they need to understand that being an academic writer is part of being an engaged thinker, writing in and for a disciplinary based community of writing practice whilst at university. As Ingold writes:

[…] that there is no division, in practice, between work and life… a practice [like academic writing] involves the whole person, continually drawing on past experience as it is projected into the future. (Ingold, p.240, in Brinkmann, 2012)

Students’ subjective experiences and feelings about academic writing practices, including those they have experienced before they got to university, should, therefore, be taken very seriously, and, this chapter argues, all experiences of writing in education, form part of a distinctively emotional, social understanding of an individual’s academic writing identity. This emphasis on the emotional aspects of academic writing is an extension of New Literacy Studies (NLS). In NLS, theorists like Barton and Hamilton, (1998), Gee, (1996) and Street, (1984, 1995), contend that it is unhelpful and potentially damaging to treat literacy as the product of a unitary, autonomous skill set that can be taught or learned independently of its context of use. Rather, Street’s (1984) emerging literacy, ‘ideological’ model of literacy:

[...] offers a more culturally sensitive view of literacy practices as they vary from one context to another. This [ideological] model starts from different premises than the autonomous model – it posits instead that literacy is a social practice, not simply a technical and neutral skill [...]. It is about knowledge: the ways in which people address reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity, being. (Street, 1984, pp.7-8)

In addition to their insistence that literacy practices like writing are inherently tied up with personal identity, NLS theorists maintain that the setting in which individuals communicate, such as the home and the workplace are characterised by clearly differentiated sets of literacy practices, texts and events.

 By acknowledging that the clearly differentiated sets of literacy practices, texts and events experienced by students at university are inevitably emotionally charged processes, we can create a new appreciation of the complexities of students’ entanglements with those practices. This emotional aspect of writing is often unappreciated by lecturers who have their appreciation of students’ fears around writing blunted by the pressure to focus on constant emphasis on writing as just the vehicle through which students’ learning is transmitted. For this reason there is a need to foreground and deconstruct the emotional processes underpinning the act of academic writing rather than focusing on it simply as a ‘transparent’ medium of learning for assessment purposes. However, universities have not traditionally embraced academic writing as a form of situated social practice that can play out differently for students with different writing histories and experiences with often very negative consequences for students struggling to understand what is required of them as writers in academia.

**What does ‘good ‘writing look like in higher education?**

A powerful, if conflicted, model of ‘good writing’ predominates in HE. It is a utilitarian, skills-based, autonomous model that presupposes that writing, once grasped, has universal applications, which are devoid of any ideological or cultural values (Street, 1996). It assumes, often simplistically and inaccurately, that lecturers and students can clearly identify and articulate what ‘good’ writing’ is. The ubiquity of autonomous approaches to academic writing in higher education means that they constitute a ‘given’, which often operates as an invisible or ‘taken for granted’ dominant discourse informing undergraduate academic writing and writing development practices (Lea and Street, 1998; Lillis, 2001). This largely tacit approach to academic writing development in higher education has fashioned entrenched polarising discourses which generate a crude binary between students who ‘can’ or ‘cannot write’ to an ‘appropriate standard’ (Williams, 1997). This means that students are, more often than not, taught a subject without the opportunity to engage explicitly with the writing processes that underpin the self-conscious presentation of subject-specific learning through written summative assignments. increased Due to the dominance of the autonomous model of academic writing development discussed above, higher education lecturers do not traditionally spend time articulating and demonstrating the particular writing practices that they expect their students to produce in summative written assignments. This lack of an explicit, process-based critical pedagogy around writing militates against students’ understanding about how they could, or should, write for their discipline successfully. The failure to articulate this understanding often leads to heightened anxiety when students receive negative feedback on their summative written assignments (French, 2016).

An uncritical acceptance of this dominant, yet tacit, utilitarian approach to academic writing and development writing practices in higher education legitimises their dominance, and has a number of implications. Firstly, it is the 'unfamiliarity and remoteness’ of dominant academic writing practices, which often creates anxiety for many students, especially those from widening participation (WP) backgrounds (Lillis and Turner, 2001; Ivanic, Clark and Rimmershaw, 2000). This is because many assumptions about academic writing practices still have their origins in a time, now long-past, when students were part of a more homogeneous, elite group who entered university via the successful completion of educational qualifications that relied on long-established ‘essayist’ forms of academic writing (French, 2013). This shared writing history no longer exists, as students today often start their degrees having completed professional or vocational qualifications such as BTEC that rely on evidence-gathering, portfolio-based literacies as well as completing A Levels or International Baccalaureate . Whilst many mature students, have either never acquired any formal educational qualifications or have been out of education for a long time (Davies, Swinburne and Williams, 2006).

The dearth of critical discussion around academic writing practices in higher education creates a compliant and conformist writing climate that often results in a situation where lecturers expect certain kinds of writing from students (who are penalised if they fail to deliver). This kind of writing environment, it has been argued hinders students’ critical thinking about their subject, inhibits experimentation and stifles the creative expression of ideas (Ivanic, 1998; Lillis 2001) as well as leading to increased anxiety and fear of failure (French, 2016). In the current higher education writing environment, therefore, the question of what actually constitutes ‘good writing’ only becomes visible or a pedagogic issue when students are deemed to not be able to produce it thus creating powerful deficit discourses around the question of academic writing development which are difficult to dispel unless the very foundation of writing as an autonomous skill can be challenged.

**Constructing deficit discourses around ‘poor’ academic writing**

The importance of getting academic writing ‘right’ creates a lot of anxiety and even fear around academic writing practices for students, especially if they feel or, as if often the case, are frequently told through their lecturers written feedback, that their writing requires attention if their grades are to improve. Emotional responses to writing in higher education are constantly mediated through the production of summative written assignments, which often require different kinds of writing, such as discursive and reflective essays, report writing and the written feedback that they receive on those assignments. This constant emotional interplay between individuals and their written texts within the academy, reflects the complexity and mutability of academic writing practices and the different (compliant and resistant) identities and constructions that they create for those using them.

Significantly, often lecturers’ frustration and irritation about the ‘poor quality’ of some students’ work often centres on their ‘poor writing skills’ even though students are, more often than not, taught a subject without the opportunity to engage explicitly with the processes, such as expected writing practices for assessment, that underpin the self-conscious, field-congruent presentation of subject-specific learning through written summative assignments. Due to the dominance of the autonomous model of academic writing development, higher education lecturers do not traditionally spend time articulating and demonstrating the particular writing practices that they expect their students to produce in summative written assignments. This lack of an explicit, process-based critical pedagogy around writing, militates I would argue, against students’ understanding about how they could, or should, write for their discipline successfully.

**Writing as a signifying practice in higher education**

For Butler ‘…identity is a signifying practice’ (1990, p.145). This chapter argues that due to the primacy of academic writing in higher education it functions as a form of socially situated practice which creates opportunities for ‘identity negotiation and identity investment’ (Butler, p.264). Deficit or remedial models of academic writing support are most often offered alongside the acculturation approach (Starfield, 2004) as a response to students who are struggling with academic writing, despite their immersion in the culture of their discipline. Officially, deficit provision exists for students who need ‘help’ in getting the technical aspects of their academic writing, (like spelling, grammar, structuring assignments and referencing ‘right’). One could argue, more controversially, that it exists for students who have failed to pick up on the tacit cues about academic writing development that acculturation offers. That is, the deficit resides with the support model, not the students.

Critical pedagogies of academic writing development, like those outlined below offer opportunities for lecturers (and students) to enact critical forms of academic identity-work that embody distinct, often conflicting and contradictory, writing identities. This chapter argues, therefore, that students’ academic identities in higher education are largely signified through successful participation in everyday academic writing and writing development practices such as reading the field, creating presentations, writing summative assignments such as essays, reflective journals and reports.

**Sources of writing anxiety and how to tackle them.**

**Change of setting**

Each new qualification/educational experience that students embark on requires different kinds of writing practice. Adapting to change and new expectations creates anxiety – especially when assumptions about writing are often tacit. It is therefore suggested that lecturers draw attention to the different disciplinary conventions of writing in their subject, using reading and the students’ own work to model the form of the writing as well as the content.

**Fear of failure**

Tacit expectations, regarding ‘appropriate’ disciplinary writing practices make students risk-averse and worried about trying anything different or new. Fearful of producing the ‘wrong’ kind of writing, failing students struggle, often fruitlessly (and alone) to unlock the secret of the ‘right’ kind of writing which they are convinced will improve their grades. Lecturers do not usually admit to students they have struggled, or do struggle, with their own academic writing. Instead, the achievement of academic writing, more often than not, appears to be ‘a kind of trick’ which lecturers, positioned discursively as expert writers, have mastered, and which students in turn, must learn to master themselves. If, however, more cognisance was taken of how students learn to write for higher education purposes (like their lecturers did before them when they were undergraduates) then closer links with writing development could be developed between what is taught, how it is taught, and what is learnt. Lecturers could then question how and why students need to learn to write in particular ways for their discipline. This could help explain the clearly demarcated territories between subject-specific content currently found within higher education.

**Challenging trajectories of individualised success**

Typically higher education written assessments valorise individualised trajectories of academic success, achievement and progression (Alexander, 2010, Simon, 1999). Moreover, higher education, in the UK at least, does not traditionally value the experience of trial and error as part of the development of academic writers. Consequently, there is little positive attention paid to students’ often complex, painful and erratic development as effective academic writers. An overtly social approach to developing academic writing skills challenges the idea that there is little connection between students’ understanding of a subject and its sociocultural, literacies based context (Scardamalia and Bereiter, 2003). Social pedagogies of learning entail an altogether more social or collective, ‘pedagogy of mutuality' (Bruner, 1996, p.56), which reflects the teaching practices popularised by Dewey (1933) and Vygotsky (1962). For Dewey, (1933) education, or more accurately learning, was mediated through an overtly dialectic process between individuals and the various learning communities that they were a part of. His students were encouraged to reflect on and learn from each other, as well as apply their learning to personally relevant problems. This ensured that what they learnt could evolve beyond a fixed curriculum or body of knowledge. Clegg (2008) discusses how undergraduates are part of wider social and cultural communities of practice in university. By working to build writing communities of practice and emphasising the important of social interaction around academic writing practices lecturers can challenge the idea that ‘good’ writing is all about individual effort and understanding and more about finding and being able to justify a position within one’s disciplinary field. Thus students should be encouraged to read and discuss each other’s written work – either through virtual learning platforms or face to face. This would complement the modelling and discussion of recognised writers in their field.

**Acknowledging the value of struggle**

There is a need for students to engage collectively in formative, low stakes, disciplinary-based academic writing practices, through which they can struggle with their writing and even fail without penalty, as an everyday part of their learning. However, disciplinary-based lecturers often struggle to address students’ struggles effectively, not least because they are not trained as writing developers nor do they feel that they have the time to incorporate academic writing development into their taught sessions .However, embedded and collaborative academic writing development can be taught practically as an on-going relational process, defined and reified over time by the social and communicative practices that all students engage in as part of their subject-specialist studies (Wingate, Andon and Cogo, 2011). Indeed, working to create a more open, supportive learning community around the development of academic writing, within disciplinary teaching practices is both important and necessary. Students, through formative and other forms of low-stakes writing should be exposed to risk, uncertainty and experimentation through supportive writing development practices, delivered in subject specific contexts. Reclaiming the significance of struggle and failure can in this way become an ultimately positive processes of academic writing development that are especially valuable for those students who are very anxious about their ability to write and who have many, often very painful, experiences struggling, and failing, with academic writing (French, 2016, pending).

**Building communities of academic writing**

Academic writing development can be viewed more productively as a social and communal practice rather than the acquisition of a set of individual attributes or skills. New academic writing development practices in higher education should be social and reflexive constructs defined by the interplay and interrelatedness of texts, writing events and writing identities in higher education, not by the fixing of those elements into ‘correct’ configurations. As a critical pedagogy, communities of practice introduce the idea that learning emerges through active ‘legitimate peripheral participation’, by individuals in ‘a community of practice’, located in a specific domain. In this model, learning occurs when an individual is engaged in the social practices of a community, because ‘learning is an integral and inseparable aspect of social practice’ (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p.31). Being engaged in communities of practice therefore:

[…] 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, 1998, p.4)

Reflecting this idea, Candlin (1998) suggests that academic writing and writing development practices should be seen as:

[…] a ‘vehicle’ by which to lead 'apprentices' through a process of continual improvement into membership of the disciplinary academy […] (p.7)

Drawing on Lave and Wenger’s (1991) idea that, over time, repeated exposure to, and experience of, a community’s practices means that new members in academia can be supported and gain experience until they are confident and competent enough to move from peripheral, to central participation in shared, disciplinary-based, practices such as, in the case of higher education, academic writing and writing practices**.**

**Conclusion**

This chapter has hopefully opened up a space to think about how students can begin to tackle and understand academic writing practices in higher education more positively. It seeks to demystify the processes and often tacit expectations round academic writing in order to lessen the anxiety that so many students experience, before they even put pen to paper. It asks lecturers to consider the emotional impact of their feedback to students and to try and facilitate more collaborative and supportive writing communities through their teaching. In conclusion, we should never deny the importance of academic writing development to students’ progression and achievement, rather we should acknowledge that we can do a great deal more to ensure that it is not a fearful and traumatic experience that they have to go through alone.

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