

PREFACE

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I was fortunate to attend, as a visitor from the U.S., the first European Association for the Teaching of Academic Writing (EATAW) conference in 2001 at Groningen. I was struck by the similarities in the challenges higher education faces on both sides of the Atlantic in terms of developing students' academic writing, and students' learning through writing. It is indeed an international 'problem.' But I was equally struck by the profound differences in responding to these challenges – among nations, institutions, disciplines, and even within disciplines. The essays in this extraordinary volume address a growing demand for help with academic writing, on the part of students and academic staff alike. And they do so in ways that bring fresh approaches, not only to Europeans, who have only recently begun to study academic writing, but also to researchers and academic staff in the U.S., where we have a century-old tradition of attention to the problem – but are much in need of these fresh approaches.

Academic writing has become a 'problem' in higher education – all around the world – because higher education sits smack between two contradictory pressures. On one end, far more students (and far more diverse students) come streaming into higher education – bringing in a far greater diversity of linguistic resources (often interpreted as 'standards are falling,' as Frank, Haacke & Tente point out). On the other end, students are leaving higher education to enter far more specialised workplaces. As the kinds of organisations and the jobs in them that students will enter have become far more specialised, the writing has become more specialised as well. Students need a greater diversity of linguistic resources to successfully enter professions and institutions. And they will have to have a greater linguistic and rhetorical flexibility to transform those professions and institutions as the pace of change increases – and with it the specialisation of writing. In the centre, often unacknowledged, sits writing – an immensely greater diversity of writing, the myriad genres of communication that disciplines and professions and institutions create to organise their work. So in the reports of various ministries and commissions, higher education is increasingly charged with developing students' writing.

Yet our understanding of writing has not caught up with these changes, in large part because academic writing has rarely been treated as an intellectually interesting

object of study, much less teaching. In the institutional environments where we academic staff live and work, and in the wider political environments where ministers and commissions and the public at large live, writing is too-often assumed to be a single, easily-generalisable set of skills learned once and for all, usually at an early age – like riding a bicycle.

This is one aspect of what Brian Street has called the autonomous view of literacy. That one set of writing skills fits all, regardless of the discipline, the profession, and the genre. There do seem to be some commonalities in academic writing across the curriculum, and in the challenges students face in developing their writing (as this volume shows). Yet a growing body of research suggests that writing is not a single generalisable set of skills, but a very complex, developing accomplishment, central to the specialised work of the myriad disciplines of higher education, and to the professions and institutions students will enter and eventually transform. Each new specialised genre a student or new employee encounters means learning new strategies – strategies that have become second nature to academic staff, and are therefore merely expected, uninteresting.

Our ways of talking about writing development in academic culture at large have for so long centred on surface features (poor spelling and so on) or on broad generalisations (students should write more clearly and coherently) that we do not have a widely shared vocabulary in higher education for talking about writing development in higher education. We tend to be like the blind men and the elephant in John Jeffry Saxe's poem. One blind man had hold of the tail and thought the elephant like a spear, another the leg and thought the elephant like a tree, and so on. Each of us thinks he or she is describing the same thing when we talk about writing, or the essay, or an argument, or clarity. We do not realise how different our expectations are. As Lea and Street from the U.K. have found (as well as researchers in North America) when one asks academic staff to point to features in students' writing that make it 'poor', there is very little agreement in what they point to. Thus an important theme in this volume is creating an intellectually interesting discussion of writing and learning – and serious research on it.

For this reason, it is refreshing to see many of these essays take very seriously the question of what academic writing is, its varied forms and functions within particular disciplines, institutions, and education systems (unlike many popular U.S. approaches). Analyses of genres, text types, and discipline-specific argument help us understand the difficulties students have in writing, difficulties that are too often invisible to academic staff – and of course students.

Academic writing, in this view, is not invisible, something that students should have learned elsewhere, but rather intellectually interesting – something partnerships across the curriculum can form around. The 'bad' writing of many students becomes not merely a deficit to be remedied, but a necessary stage in students' understanding and entering powerful institutions and professions. Focusing on writing becomes a way of focusing on the methods, practices, and social-psychological processes of intellectual inquiry, of innovation, and of learning. The study of academic writing is thus part of deep higher education reform.

Many of the essays in this volume offer new ways of addressing this central problem: How to simultaneously raise the awareness of students, specialised academic

staff, and policy makers to writing's powerful and varied role in learning, teaching, work, and citizenship, while at the same time integrating efforts to develop writing into the specialised studies and activities writing serves – instead of holding academic writing development on the invisible margins of academic work.

Raising consciousness of writing through co-operation among academic staff is crucial, whether through student support units working with academic staff in the disciplines, or through courses in academic writing that are designed with a close eye to the demands of writing in the disciplines. In this way it is possible to reveal tacit knowledge, develop a shared vocabulary for discussing writing, and contribute widespread reform of higher education at a much more profound level than the ministries and commissions can ever achieve with top-down structural reforms.

Many of the essays here speak to the difficulties of this slow, bottom-up educational renewal. Each department or faculty, each institution, each national system will have to evolve its own ways of approaching academic writing development. And in this volume are many ideas for constructing useful cross-curricular dialogue and collaborative pedagogical projects.

In that regard, this volume also shows the value of cross-national comparisons and dialogue for building collaborations. All of these studies have been influenced (more or less, positively or negatively) by North American research traditions. But each also grows out of its own institutional, regional, and national roots. It is crucial for researchers and program developers in academic writing to sometimes see with others' eyes the problems they confront. As I found in co-editing, with David Foster, *Writing and Learning in Cross-National Perspective: Transitions from Secondary to Higher Education* (NCTE Press, 2002), cross-national dialogue is most valuable not in providing solutions but in 'making the familiar strange' (as Clifford Geertz says), helping researchers and program developers to adapt not adopt practices.

For example, for over a century now we in the U.S. have mainly tried to deal with the problem of student writing by requiring students to take a general writing course during their first year – with very mixed success. This volume shows that the debate over general versus discipline-based writing development is very much alive in Europe, which has no tradition of 'first-year composition.' But even where writing is taught special, separate courses in Europe, in large classes, it is done so with a much greater attention to the demands of writing in the disciplines than is usually the case in the U.S. We in the U.S. have much to learn from European research and pedagogical innovations, borne out of very different educational systems. Similarly, the U.S. efforts over the last 20 years to research and teach writing in the disciplines through co-operating with academic staff (called in the U.S. Writing Across the Curriculum) have influenced much European research and program development. And I look forward very much to a fruitful transatlantic dialogue as we in the U.S. learn from European research and pedagogical innovations.

This volume will bring to light – for Europeans as well as North Americans and others world wide – the interest and importance of academic writing. And it introduces the young but strong national research traditions that make writing visible, and offer new prospects for higher education reform world-wide. I look forward

very much to the next EATAW conference and to continuing the cross-national dialogue this book admirably furthers.

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