

On the Borderline: Writing about Writing, Threshold Concepts of Writing, and Credit-Bearing Academic Writing Subjects in Australia

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Abstract: This paper considers the relevance and application of Writing About Writing (WAW) (Downs & Wardle, 2007; Wardle, 2009) and Threshold Concepts of Writing (TCW) (Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2015) in the Australian higher education context. These approaches to literacy and writing curriculum development have been developed in the United States context as a critical reinvention of the first-year composition curriculum and as resolving what has been termed the “content problem” – the lack of a consensus about what the discipline of composition should teach in first-year writing classes (Seitz, 2005). Without a strong tradition of first-year writing or an offering of academic writing subjects as credit-bearing parts of the curriculum in Australia, it is not surprising that the discussion or consideration of these ideas has been minimal in this context. However, as this paper will argue, to the extent that such courses or programs are becoming more common in Australian higher education, academic literacy educators face new demands from institutions and students while continuing to respond to perennial misconceptions of their field as being merely a remedial grammar or student support service on the margins of the main teaching and learning work undertaken in disciplines. Insofar as WAW and the TCW literature help to clarify the disciplinary status and goals of literacy programs, the paper argues that they suggest a way forward.

Introduction

While Australian universities have addressed the literacy needs of a growing and changing student cohort in varying ways, the common practice in the United States of offering academic writing as a credit-bearing subject has played a relatively minor role. There are signs, however, that this is changing, with at least two of the country’s leading institutions providing broad-based, cross-disciplinary, first-year subjects focused on developing academic literacy. The rationale behind such courses may vary, but one reason could be that such programs address the issue of marginalisation: the historical sense that academic literacy programs and staff have been “pinned to the margins” of the academy (Stevenson & Kokkinn, 2007, p. 45).

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Setting aside the question of whether credit-bearing courses can actually provide a more “central” place for Academic Language and Learning in the university curriculum, it is clear that such approaches pose different challenges. The most significant of these is what may be termed the content problem or the question of what such writing courses should be about (Seitz, 2005). A simplistic response to this question might be that writing courses would be about imparting the skills of academic writing. However, for those within the discipline, a purely skills-based approach conflicts with longstanding philosophical views that writing is not merely a collection of basic skills that can be learned in isolation from disciplinary context or content. In this way, the two problems of marginalisation and writing course content are linked. The cross-disciplinary academic writing course designed around skills alone appears to perpetuate a view of writing as a marginal subject within the university curriculum. On the other hand, the argument for embedded, or discipline specific, academic writing support programs – following an academic literacies (Johns, 1997; Lea & Street, 2006), or disciplinary discourses (Hyland, 2013), model – doesn’t appear to have cut through with administrators, faculty staff or students. Marginalisation has a self-perpetuating character. Being on the margins, staff views on these issues are not often heard; because they are not heard, such views remain marginal.

In any case, this paper considers the emergent practice in Australia of teaching academic writing in credit-bearing subjects. After some brief further background on the language and learning field and credit-bearing academic writing courses, I reflect on the design and delivery of one first-year academic writing subject. This case study highlights the complexities of the content problem. In particular, it reveals the challenges of trying to shift the focus from skills to content, or of reconciling a disciplinary discourses perspective with a cross-disciplinary, general course. An additional dimension of the challenge of credit-bearing academic writing courses in Australia is that there has been little in the way of practice-based discussion of these issues in the local literature. The third section of the paper, thus, looks to draw on wider research from the composition field in the U.S. to find ways forward. What is immediately apparent is that the interlinked issues of marginalisation and content have been a topic for discussion in that context over the past decade or so. Specifically, both the Writing about Writing (WAW) and Threshold Concepts of Writing (TCW) approaches (see Adler-Kassner, 2012; Downs & Wardle, 2007; Wardle, 2009; and Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2015), which are proposed as critical reinventions of the composition curriculum, appear to address the problem of marginalisation and the problem of content simultaneously. In the final part of the paper, I consider the relevance and applicability of these suggested approaches in the Australian context. I argue that they not only provide valuable insights into the challenges of delivering academic literacy programs, but suggest effective and principled approaches to designing credit-bearing academic writing courses.

Background: Language and Learning and Credit-Bearing Academic Writing Courses in Australia

Histories of teaching academic writing in Australian universities reveal a considerable variety in approaches and the degree to which writing instruction has taken hold. The majority of Australian institutions offer some form of language and learning program, with the location of these programs varying from institution to institution, depending on particular needs, and structures. Some are located within student service or support centres, others with counselling services, in higher education development, or in libraries, and others within specific faculties (Emerson & Clerehan, 2009; Chanock, 2011; Stevenson & Kokkinn, 2007). The professional status of staff responsible for developing students’ literacy skills also varies from institution to institution, and sometimes within institutions. A database of Academic Language and Learning activity suggests about 55% of staff are

classified as general – including a range of non-academic roles and under titles such as administrative or professional staff – and 45% are classified as academic, or faculty staff (James & Maxwell, 2012). Programs are variously framed as preparatory, support, or additional with respect to the main teaching and learning activity of disciplines. While such framing may be attributed to pragmatic managerial problem-solving, a deeper issue is signified: there is a persistent view (both within and outside the university) that writing is merely a mechanical skill that should have been learned before university, and therefore that the role of language and learning staff is to provide remedial instruction for those who have missed out or fallen short. Despite often being recognised and lauded individually for their contribution by students, or being seen as indispensable by other faculty and professional colleagues, many language and learning staff remain insecure in both practice and self-perception. As Malkin and Chanock (2018) put it, “uncertainty about who and what we are, as a profession, has been with us from the beginning and persists today” (p. 16).

Clerehan (2007) points out that this may have more to do with institutional factors such as tenure, or lack of opportunities for promotion and influence, managerial interference, and the ever-present threat of review and restructure than the actual situation of literacy programs *vis-à-vis* the main curriculum. Moreover, the uncertainty experienced by language and learning staff is more practical than existential. That is to say, the professional insecurity that characterises the field does not appear to have arisen from, or led to a lack of a clear theory about how the work of supporting student literacy should proceed. In spite of (perhaps even as a direct reaction against) the marginal status of practitioners, a philosophical position on the role of language in learning seems to have been adopted early on, and has held firm over the years. In rough summary, the core principles are that the development of skills and the development of content knowledge are inextricably linked (Taylor, 1988; Moore & Hough, 2007); that academic writing is not simply a skill that can be learned in general, outside of any particular content or context (Hyland, 2004, 2013); and that the optimum place for literacy development is embedded within a particular discipline (Murray & Nallaya, 2016; Chanock, 2007; Clerehan, 2002). The constancy of such beliefs is all the more remarkable given that the ideal of seamlessly integrated literacy programs within disciplines is relatively rare.

These ideals have informed the ways staff work with students in individual consultations and workshops (Clerehan, 1997; Woodward-Kron, 2007), and the ways they work with colleagues in the disciplines (Vance & Crosling, 1998; Murphy & Stewart, 2002; Dunworth & Briguglio, 2010); they have also guided the development of materials, programs and policies (Percy & Skillen, 2000; Dunworth, Drury, Kralik, & Moore, 2013; Harper, 2013). Where language and learning staff have been involved in the delivery of credit-bearing academic writing programs, the principles outlined have also played a part. However, such programs have not been common. It is not surprising, then, that there has been little if any attention to the matter of writing courses for credit in the Australian language and learning literature through the 1990s and early 2000s. What literature there is has focused specifically on the design and delivery of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs for second-language learners of English (see Melles, Millar, Morton, & Fagan, 2005; and Fenton-Smith, Humphreys, Walkinshaw, Rowan, & Lobo, 2017).

While the lack of attention to the challenges of credit-bearing academic literacy courses in the literature could be attributed merely to the fact that such courses have been uncommon, it could also be said that a philosophical opposition to the idea of generic literacy programs has contributed to the relative scarcity of such programs. By this I mean that Australian language and learning practitioners have not been oblivious to the idea of teaching academic writing in a credit-bearing mode. But attitudes toward what might be called the U.S. model of rhetoric and composition courses have been mixed. Chanock (2011) cites a 1978 paper by the influential figure, Gordon

Taylor, in which the U.S. system of “service English” and “remedial writing clinics” is described as cumbersome (Chanock, 2011, p. 61). The criticism is not necessarily offered as a way of commending the Australian approach at that time, which is described by the same author as *ad hoc*: a variety of different universities each finding their own way to deal with the problem of literacy. It is clear nevertheless that the idea of a generic writing course did not have much appeal. Among others, Taylor argued vociferously throughout the 1980s and early 1990s against generic literacy programs, or a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching academic writing in the university (Taylor, 1988; Taylor & Nightingale, 1990). Of course, characterising the U.S. credit-based model as providing only generic writing programs was overly simplistic then, as it is now. The critique of the academic writing course, nevertheless, was aligned with an affirmation of the core principles of disciplinary discourses approaches outlined above.

Determining why writing has developed in the North American context as a subject in its own right, while such credit-bearing subjects have not taken root in Australia is not the focus of this paper; having noted this distinction, I would only add that in each context the respective way of doing things is now largely taken for granted. Nevertheless, a number of institutions have introduced courses, subjects or units in academic language, writing and communication skills, and often as elective rather than required coursework (Arkoudis & Doughney, 2014). This may be attributed to the exponential increase in diversity of the student cohort as a result of governmental and institutional moves to increase participation (Arkoudis, Baik, & Richardson, 2012). There has also been a strong pedagogical movement toward improving “transition” learning programs (Kift, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010). It is not easy, however, to say exactly how many institutions currently offer credit-based academic literacy programs at the undergraduate level. While the previously mentioned database (James & Maxwell, 2012) provides a clear picture of the diverse practices of the field, it lists only one course for credit: a writing course for higher degree research students.

A search of university offerings nevertheless reveals examples of courses that sit both within and across degree programs. The most substantial example would appear to be at the University of Sydney where a sequence of units in writing studies is offered by the Department of Writing Studies (Shetler, Thomas, Di Lauro, & Miller, 2013). Looking at the remainder of the “Group of Eight” (the country’s leading eight research and teaching universities), the offerings vary: there are first-year level academic writing subjects at the University of Adelaide (Academic Literacy for University), and the University of Queensland (Fundamentals of Academic Writing); Monash University has offered a variety of introductory units in Academic Writing and EAP for more than 15 years; in the remaining four of the Group of Eight (The University of Western Australia, the University of Melbourne, Australian National University, and the University of New South Wales), current course handbooks and unit guides contain no such courses. None of the courses listed here are “required”; all are voluntary electives.

Course guides and websites of the country’s 35 other universities reveal examples here and there such as the University of Tasmania’s English Writing: Grammar and Composition course, or the University of South Australia’s English for Academic and International Communication taught under the auspices of The School of Creative Industries. On this evidence, it is unlikely that we will see institution-wide, compulsory writing course requirements any time soon, but the existence of such courses does represent a shift from the still far more prevalent language and learning skills support workshop and consultation models. We can be hopeful but their existence is also insufficient to state that the remediation model has been unwound. Many of these subjects operate just like the remedial workshop offered at the Student Learning Centre. And as already noted, a number of questions are raised by the move toward credit-bearing courses.

A general question for the field as a whole is whether or not such programs can address the issue of marginalisation. Does teaching a course for credit grant those involved a degree of security, visibility or centrality that is not possible in the provision of adjunct, concurrent support? Perhaps it does. In a user-pays system, student enrolments in subjects directly equate to revenue; the costs of providing a literacy program are more or less transparent to heads of schools, deans, and administrators. Increasing enrolments in a course mean that it is almost guaranteed to continue, and affords a degree of security to staff involved in their delivery. What's more, being engaged in commensurate activity, attending curriculum meetings, boards of studies, and boards of examiners with other teaching staff can ensure that academic writing teachers are more visible and accountable to colleagues. Certainly, there is potential for a greater degree of visibility than for language and learning support workers who often sit on the fringes of courses and curriculum or are physically located entirely separately in student service centres or libraries.

That said, the degree to which credit-bearing subjects or courses could help to address the issue of marginalisation may depend on the specific location, cohort, or context of a such offerings. As far as I am aware, there is no quantitative or qualitative assessment of the pragmatic benefits of credit-bearing subjects, nor has there been any exploration of the impact of different locations on their success or effectiveness. But context also raises further pedagogical questions: is it possible to create a single subject that can meet the needs of students with a range of abilities and interests? How does one manage such differences and variability? These questions lead in turn to the most basic questions of curriculum design: how will such a course be organised? What content is essential, effective, or manageable? For those coming from an academic literacies perspective, can this be reconciled with a generic subject?

Having been involved over a number of years in the delivery of a first-year academic writing course, I offer a reflection on my own experience as a starting point. Acknowledging that this may be deemed “anecdotal evidence,” I am arguing that such courses are promising in many ways, even if, like this example, they have not been entirely successful at realising their potential. I am suggesting that my experiments toward a “content-focused” credit-bearing program enable a clearer understanding of the challenges and affordances of the credit-bearing course more generally.

The Content Problem in Credit-Bearing Academic Writing Courses: A Case Study

A common approach to organising writing curriculum is to focus around a combination of common academic skills, structures, or styles (see, e.g., Bailey, 2015; University of Adelaide, 2018) such as how to plan an essay, how to analyze essay topics, research, construct a paragraph or write an effective introduction. However, this approach has been widely dismissed across the field (or at least in contexts where writing course curriculum has been considered at all). As Ketter and Hunter (1997) found, students tend to “conceive the form of the academic paper as a rigid heuristic which limits them,” or to “see the structure . . . as a box into which their ideas have to fit” (p. 107). Thus, as noted above, from an academic literacies perspective, the purely “skills, structure and style” approach seems destined to contribute to the perpetuation of such formalist notions and only provide a surface approach to learning to write.

In line with Taylor's claim that improving student writing involves addressing students' knowledge or “confusions” around a specific topic as much as addressing their awareness or application of generic forms (Taylor, 1988, p. 58), an alternative is to take a content-based approach. However, starting from the premise that students in an academic writing course need to write about something in particular (not anything in general) to put their skills into practice, the question of

what exactly they will write about becomes a pressing concern. Having them write on topics they are working on in their home disciplines raises problems of the same work being submitted for assessment twice; having them write on topics of their own choice can mean they tackle topics beyond their abilities, or which do not lend themselves to academic analysis. Selecting an appropriate content thus falls to the academic writing teacher. And while the academic literacies literature makes a compelling case for embedding the teaching of writing in subject learning, it provides little guidance for someone who has to select a content focus for a stand-alone subject. The more general the context and diverse the cohort, the greater the difficulty of identifying content that will be engaging and relevant, and, most of all, which will enable the development of the expected academic literacy.

Faced with the challenge of redesigning the curriculum for an Introduction to Academic Writing subject at my university (ATS1297: Academic Writing – an elective subject with cohorts of approximately 200 students per semester, drawn from across the disciplines of the university), I found it relatively easy to select subject matter, or content to base essay topics on, but less easy to strike a balance between the content focus and student expectations and needs. The rationale for a redesign was that the subject had initially been part of a professional writing stream within a creative writing program, itself an offshoot of a traditional English literature department. In this context, the focus was on students with already well-advanced writing skills who were looking to specialise in writing. A faculty decision was made to focus on a wider cohort of students with less advanced writing skills, especially students needing support to get to the starting point for academic achievement. Despite its prior focus on an advanced cohort, the inherited curriculum of the unit was mostly based on the skills model outlined previously, with weekly topics breaking down the various components of an academic argument, or the writing process, but with no central or consistent content focus. The choice of what students would write about in their essays was largely left to students, while course materials, examples of academic texts and readings moved at random across various subject matter (or content) week by week.

In my first pass at addressing the content problem, I sought only to provide a more consistent approach to content, and to build students' basic familiarity with a narrower range of issues and topics. The goal was to enable class conversations around shared knowledge and to introduce content about which a majority of students could be assumed to have some prior knowledge, if not expertise. I elected to focus on students' own experience as young adults, and social problems that they could be expected to have encountered in popular media representations of young people: for instance, binge drinking, risk-taking behaviours, and subcultures. A primary consideration was that these topics are also addressed in academic studies of youth culture. While some students embraced this approach, a number of students expressed both weariness and wariness about the topics: weariness because they had been discussing youth issues through much of their secondary education and wariness because the curriculum asked them to critically comment on behaviour and beliefs from an academic perspective they did not necessarily share. Graff (2004) called this the "intellectualizing" or "problematizing" of everyday experience, and noted students' resistance to it as a factor in developing their academic literacy. It also became apparent that without explicit instruction in some of the specific theories and concepts that were necessary to the analysis of the social issues – such as the theory of moral panic which has been a mainstay in sociological studies of youth culture, media, and deviance over the past 50 years (see Cohen, 2003) – their writing could be quite limited. In plain terms, many students ignored the theory altogether, or many others gave only clumsy approximations of it.

On one level, this seemed to confirm Taylor's view that student writing is impacted by uncertainties about topics as much as by a student's limited awareness of forms of writing or grammar (1988).

But it was also clear that, as teachers, we had largely left students to their own devices in terms of learning or applying complex theory. Nevertheless, moral panic theory served an important purpose in challenging students to go beyond rehearsing simplistic for-and-against opinions about a given social issue. To manage students' learning, the amount of explicit instruction and class time devoted to discussion of moral panic theory was increased in subsequent iterations. While some students thrived with this additional instruction, many continued to struggle. More disconcertingly, for some students, the focus on moral panics was perplexing. Comments in evaluations and informal communication with teaching staff suggested that the students felt they had enrolled in order to learn how to write, but ended up being taught only about moral panics. As much as we might affirm that the content was intended merely as a necessary vehicle for learning to write, students' preconceptions about the nature of writing and expectations of a writing course impacted on their engagement.

In part, the problem may have been a result of the assessment element of credit-bearing courses: in a non-assessable workshop, the use of particular content to discuss aspects of writing is not necessarily troubling – students don't have to have any real understanding of the sample content to get something out of the workshop. When students are given marks for a particular task, and marks are allocated to their understanding of the topic rather than simply their performance of certain written conventions, it is understandable that they feel they are being marked on something other than what they joined a subject to learn about.

The resolution of the content problem in these iterations of the academic writing curriculum, in short, was not entirely satisfying. The balance seemed to have shifted too far from form to content. And even if the student perspective on this could be discounted as a reflection of their preconceptions about what an academic writing course would provide, or an unintended effect of assessment, it was clear that a true integration of form and content had not been achieved. Over subsequent iterations of the course, fine adjustments and "expectation management" in presentation of content, as well as greater flexibility in students' choice of topics and greater clarity around assessment requirements have helped to resolve some issues. Merely being aware of the ways that certain students may react to a given curriculum is a valuable pedagogical insight.

Although many students expressed satisfaction with the academic writing course, the course still seemed to be uneasily balanced. Without a clearer philosophical foundation for content selection, the risk of overcompensating one way or the other between form and content remained. The most important question of whether or not students were developing more than superficial understandings and capabilities in academic writing was also difficult to determine. Continuing to seek an approach to academic writing curriculum that was consistent with an academic literacies perspective has led me to look more closely at the U.S. composition field – a system in which the credit-bearing course is far more central. In the following section I will discuss how the recent Writing about Writing (WAW) and Threshold Concepts of Writing (TCW) movements proposed "reinvention of the first-year writing curriculum" in the U.S. context may suggest a way forward for those involved in credit-bearing programs in Australia.

Writing About Writing and Threshold Concepts of Writing: A Way Forward for Australian Literacy Programs?

From an Australian perspective, the U.S. system of rhetoric and composition subjects (university-wide, compulsory writing instruction) has been questioned, but also appears as an object of fascination, or even envy. Though it appears that no one has researched attitudes among Australian practitioners on the issue, I doubt I am the only one to have imagined that the reach, and relative

academic stability, of credit-bearing writing programs would be preferable to the often tenuous learning support model. This view is quickly dispelled when looking at the literature from the U.S. The same sorts of insecurities around the marginalisation of academic literacy programs are evident in that context (Smit, 2004; Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2015). As such, delivering courses for credit is not, on its own, sufficient to resolve the issue of marginalisation.

Even if it is acknowledged that the credit-bearing model is an imperfect solution to the problem of marginalisation, it seems one worth pursuing. However, it is essential that any implementation of such programs is done with awareness of the particular challenges of content. Seitz's (2005) account of the content problem, certainly, resonates with my own experience of trying out "various" content as a focus in an academic writing subject. As he writes, the question of content in first-year writing courses has been addressed by individual teachers and writing programs in a variety of pragmatic, but seemingly arbitrary ways: "students are invited to read and write about family or work or media or government or history or sports or cultural theory or the environment or anything under the sun" (Seitz, 2005, p. 26). Seitz goes on to suggest that this "variation" of content can be attributed to a sense across the field that "subject matter, at least in the first-year course, doesn't matter" (p. 26). My own experience suggests that uncertainty about what will work led to variation in content rather than indifference or seeking to follow a personal whim in curriculum selection. And while Seitz is clearly arguing that content does matter, against an indifference he sees as the prevailing view in the field, he stops short of suggesting how the dilemma might be resolved.

In this respect, Downs and Wardle's (2007) more comprehensive, and radical vision of how first-year writing curriculum could be re-envisioned – what has become known as Writing about Writing (WAW) – deserves attention. In the absence of clear evidence to suggest that generalist (content neutral or content eclectic) writing programs have achieved the goal of transfer, Downs and Wardle suggest that helping students to develop discourse awareness is at least a more honest and achievable outcome. In short, though they did not specifically describe it in these terms initially, Downs and Wardle's proposed solution to the content problem is to make the first-year academic writing subject an introduction to disciplinary discourses or academic literacies.

Building on and contributing to Meyer and Land's (2006) notion of Threshold Concepts (TC) – the idea that within domains of knowledge, a certain concept or idea can function as a "portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something" (Meyer and Land, 2006, p. 1) – Adler-Kassner and Wardle (2015) have further sought to think through what might constitute the Threshold Concepts of Writing (TCW). They outline two purposes of this development in the context of a WAW curriculum: first, to provide a clear sense of the discipline of writing studies and the concepts around which it revolves (Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2015, p. xii); second, to further "define" what might constitute elements of a useful writing "curriculum" for students, in line with Meyer and Land's contention that addressing such troublesome knowledge is an essential element in the progress of learning. As my preceding discussion suggests, the appeal of this in the Australian context is clear: it would involve the explicit integration of disciplinary discourses or academic literacies principles into curriculum design. And while the "myth of transience" or "transfer" (Wardle, 2009) is challenged (or abandoned) in the process, it is said to be in the disciplinary interests of writing studies to do so.

What may be most interesting about the WAW and TCW movements thus is that they link the problem of marginalisation and the problem of content. When considering the preceding reflection on my curricular experiments in ATS1297, some readers of *Across the Disciplines* may have been reminded of what has become known as the "no vampires" policy (Adler-Kassner, 2012, p. 132), a particularly clear expression of a key principle of the WAW approach. The idea is that superficially

appealing to students' interests by dealing with content such as vampires in first-year writing courses undermines the disciplinary claims of writing studies, and thus further contributes to the marginalisation of the field.

The moral panic curriculum I had initiated in ATS1297, for instance, might not hold up against this principle. Though I had originally taken the moral panic as just an exemplar of academic discourse (and because I thought it might be engaging for students), it was also clear that students found it difficult to distinguish the core issues of writing from the example chosen to carry them. In more recent semesters, the course has also taken on a strong "shark studies" aspect, as a spate of fatal attacks in Australian coastal waters seemed a ready example of a contemporary moral panic to investigate. Strictly applied, the "no vampires" rule would include a prohibition against other toothy and mythically charged monsters. Affirming the disciplinary interests of the field of writing studies over and against what might have popular appeal for students is an essential step in taking a more principled approach to curriculum design.

As Adler-Kassner (2012) suggests, the stakes are high. Many Australian practitioners have likewise noted that the key answers to two central questions (what are universities supposed to be preparing students for? and how well are universities preparing them?) are increasingly being answered institutionally without reference to the disciplinary expertise of those who are most directly involved in designing courses and teaching students. Over the past 15 years or so, Australian institutions have been preoccupied with various generic skills, graduate attributes and employability agendas, with little regard for the deeper analysis required to address students' challenges (see Moore & Morton, 2017; Chanock, 2003; Clerehan, Chanock, Moore, & Prince, 2003; Star & Hammer, 2008). In Adler-Kassner's terms, though it is frequently acknowledged that the future for which students are supposed to be prepared through higher education is complex, uncertain, and unknowable, their preparation has been reduced to learning a set of simplistic or generic skills without the connections and contexts that would give these skills meaning (Adler-Kassner, 2012).

In thinking about ways forward, Australian practitioners need to consider some further critical perspectives and challenges that could be raised about both WAW and TCW. Two main challenges in particular stand out as demanding further consideration. The first involves the consequences of abandoning the goal of transfer as a motivating force behind academic literacy programs of all types.

As Adler-Kassner, Downs and Wardle, and others have shown, the key problem in the field is not marginalisation or content precisely, but the promise of transfer. This is of particular relevance in the Australian context. While the problem of content only really matters to those involved in developing stand-alone courses in academic writing, those involved in providing concurrent support also need to speak to the transferability of what they do with students. The implications of abandoning the goal of transfer need to be carefully considered. It could be counter-productive for the discipline – perhaps leading administrators, stakeholders, students to question the relevance of writing courses. The challenge is rather to clarify that transfer is one possibility that can always be realised through engagement in a writing course, but that this should not be the overwhelming motivation for a course itself (Wardle, 2009). Stanton (2017) further suggests that the focus on transfer in writing courses as the only measure of value is akin to a dominant, but harmful, focus on recovery or overcoming in approaches to disability. In this respect, WAW courses are seen as valuing knowledge about writing as an end in itself, rather than as a means to an end.

The second challenge is the question of whether a writing studies curriculum can engage a sufficiently wide cohort of students. An early objection to Downs and Wardle's proposal was that

while such subject matter might be appropriate for linguistics majors, it would not engage a wider cohort of students only looking for a course to prepare them for their substantive studies in whatever discipline that might be (Miles, et al., 2008). Accepting that a purely writing studies curriculum might not be interesting or engaging for all students, the complexity or difficulty of the material could also be beyond the reach of first-year students. However, from the perspective of my own experience of the challenges of introducing students to both simple and complex theory in the context of a writing course, the objection does not carry much weight. Whatever content is chosen comes with a risk of complexity, and the risk that some students will struggle to see its relevance elsewhere in their studies. The alignment between the WAW curriculum and TC helpfully refocuses attention on the “troublesome” nature of learning (Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2015).

It may also be argued that the value found in WAW and the TCW movement extends beyond the credit-bearing course. The theories of literacy and discourse that underpin the WAW curriculum are of a piece with ideas that have been current in the Australian language and learning field for most of its history. What is perhaps less well known is that important contributors to the development of thinking around the TC in general have been Australian-based academics in a variety of disciplines (see e.g., Meyer & Land, 2006; Land, Meyer, & Smith, 2008; and Meyer, Land, & Baillie, 2010). The value of shared connections, especially between those directly involved in teaching in the disciplines and the literacy staff working with them, has been a frequent theme of language and learning literature (see e.g., Dunworth & Briguglio, 2010; Chanock, 2007). But, the language and learning field in Australia can also be seen as having often failed to have influenced administrators and faculty. As Chanock (2011) argues, the field has also frequently been in tension with the field of higher education development: competition for the attention and support of universities, and faculty staff, has exacerbated ideological differences between the fields in relation to teaching and learning.

By contrast, the TC movement has managed, it seems, to challenge and inspire numbers of educators across the university to consider the complexities of learning, and to some degree, to appreciate the role of discourse in this complexity. Highlighting the deeper links between TC and academic literacies such as the Vygotskyan notion of the interwoven nature of conceptual and linguistic development could be a useful strategy. As Meyer and Land (2006) acknowledge, “it is hard to imagine any shift in perspective that is not simultaneously accompanied by (or occasioned through) an extension of the student’s use of language” (p. 374).

Conclusion

The main goal of this paper has been to consider a relatively borderline, but emerging part of the response to students’ academic literacy needs in the Australian university system. The credit-bearing academic writing course is a long way from becoming a common feature of Australian universities, but regardless of the current scale, such courses could represent an effective bulwark against further marginalisation of the language and learning field. I have deliberately tried to avoid in this paper any direct comparison of the language and learning support model with a credit-bearing course model in pedagogical terms. In other words, it has not been my intent to suggest that credit-bearing models offer a better education than concurrent language and learning approaches. What advantages there are may be solely a matter of pragmatics. The credit-bearing course may give those involved slightly better employment circumstances; professional pathways to some degree can make their work more visible to the wider university. As noted, in the U.S. experience, marginalisation and uncertainty have also been ongoing concerns.

Pragmatism aside, there remains a question of whether or not it is pedagogically justifiable to offer cross-disciplinary writing programs given the “challenges” of content and transfer. Some compositionists (see e.g., Smit, 2004) suggest not persisting with generic composition classes, especially if these take the place of discipline-based programs, or the full integration of writing or academic literacy within disciplines. Given the opportunity to implement academic writing subjects for credit the questions for Australian practitioners that I have sought to answer are these: Is there a way to approach the task without resorting to a reductive notion of “skills” as the basis? Moreover, can principles of disciplinary specificity and the importance of content in the teaching of academic literacy be maintained in a broadly targeted, cross-disciplinary and credit-bearing writing course?

As I have argued, WAW and TCW suggest models for developing effective curricula that combine specific content and disciplinary knowledge without limiting the curriculum to skills. Taking this approach may also help to define the disciplinary interests of literacy educators across different contexts. In sum, a properly considered and constructed course based on the principles outlined in the WAW and TCW Literature might not represent a complete move away from the margins, but may well be a step in the right direction.

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