

13 Reflections: An Evolving Academic Writer

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How do you become an academic writer? We are not born with the skill of writing. It is a learned competence—learned usually at school—and academic writing is acquired, to varying degrees, after entry into the academy (or university). An academic writer ranges from the starter student constructing their first piece of writing to the experienced faculty member producing for professional publication. Competence is complex, forged gradually and moderated by personal disposition, previous experiences of writing and its reception, conceptions of the target readership, context, discipline, belongingness to a community, among many other factors. The authors of the collected papers in this book attest to the complexity of the issues engrained in the process of acquiring and maintaining the status of academic writer.

The authors indeed stimulate me to reflect on the question: how I acquired (a degree of) academic writing competence, and how over half a century of personal involvement in academia has shaped or interacted with themes raised by the authors, taking the position of the reflective practitioner (see Anson, this volume). I acquired a basis of academic writing competence at university (like most students), and that basis is likely to have forged my writing style which probably remains very similar today, though I have not compared writings to verify this. Hartley et al. (2001), however, note how their writing styles remained constant over forty years despite changing writing technologies.

Twenty years ago, I attended the first EATAW conference in Groningen (see Zimmerman, this volume) and recall with much pleasure intense discussion with the many delegates and, for me, it represented my first encounter with experts from dedicated writing centres. This broadened my outlook immediately since my work was more specifically dedicated to writing integrated in the disciplines (see Björk et al., 2003, pp. 11–12). I had volunteered to “teach” writing for publication to academic economists in 1984 and this then opened the door to like-minded courses for a range of health science and biomedical disciplines in the years following. The courses were heavily based on evidence from published articles in the disciplines in question. The pedagogical approach may have been similar, but the strong focus on (intended) meaning and the close peer-group analysis of participants’ writings entailed that up to three-quarters of the

time was devoted to disciplinary content (“Do I need to elaborate this point?” “How should I convey that to my disciplinary peers?” “Do I need to provide additional evidence for this claim?”). The high degree of disciplinary coherence and understanding among health science academics and biomedical academics generated a collegiate atmosphere for peer discussion, especially in courses for Ph.D. students aiming to write for publication that started at the same time. Yet it was in the very first group of economists that I encountered challenges to this disciplinary approach. Economists come in all shapes and sizes: I had not realized that my motley crew of labor economists, social economists, financial economists, econometricians, macro-economists, economists of the firm, even one evolutionary economist, shared neither the same expectations nor the same conceptions of how writing was in their specific disciplines. My approach faltered. The striking absence of an expected (degree of) homogeneity between the economics disciplines was even more dramatic when I worked in law, where the academics would use highly suggestive legal argument to undermine the propositions in the writing of other law academics with whom they disagreed. I was unable to distinguish play-acting from reality.

My homogeneous approach faltered again, years later, but less dramatically, when the customized Ph.D. courses for health sciences and biomedical sciences were combined. Again, conceptions of the target writing did not concur, but the basic genre principles, that is the IMRD article structure (e.g., Swales & Feak, 2004), still largely applied because of the shared “reservoir of understandings” in these disciplines (Hyland, 2004, p. 71). The course programme which was designed in the 1980s remained essentially unchanged (except for the relevant example publications which differed according to the participants’ research fields) and was not unlike that presented by Glasman-Deal (2010). The writing course still continues, as a blended programme, focused on the IMRD, notwithstanding the critique of such formalist academic writing which constrains perspectives on the construction of knowledge (see Labaree, 2020).

I stress the disciplinary differences (as emphasized in Machura, this volume, and Castelló, this volume) because I have been fortunate to work both in academia and in industry where the range of genres demanded may well exceed that in academia. Machura’s contribution highlights the contrast between academic writing and workplace writing, and Castelló stresses the difference between writing for processes of education (academic) and for the disciplinary community (writing with one’s peers as both source and target readers). This leads me back to how I began to write “academically” (as distinct from academic writing).

My first experience of writing “academically” was in Paris in 1967–1968 when I was ostensibly studying French. My experiences in Paris during that momentous year gave me a deep insight into the relationship between education

and society, as well as a few bruises. At the time I did not think of myself as a writer. Two practical tasks stood out and both helped me understand what it meant to write not just “for the teacher” but also for external readers (for example, of newspapers, magazines, exhibition brochures, and “engagés”). The first task concerned summary writing: the teacher would choose a longish text (usually on a cultural or social issue of that particular day) and read it aloud at near normal speed. This was usually 15–20 minutes. We the students had to take notes and then construct a written summary for a specified readership without ever seeing the original text. At first I found it an extremely demanding task, which required intensive listening for a relatively long period, a need to keep in mind the intended readership (i.e., be selective), take notes, and then construct a summary of what I would consider the relevant information (and pay attention to structure, style, grammar, spelling, etc.).

The second task was the traditional “*explication de texte*,” a method widely used for the analysis of literary and other texts (see Mermier & Boilly-Widmer, 1993; Perret, 2020; also Aldridge et al. (1963) for a brief explanation in English of the approach; the strong French tradition is referred to in Zenger & Pill, this volume). Barthes (1963), in particular, considers the “*explication de texte*” a “critique of language,” embedded essentially in a certain type of culture that he characterizes as “national” and “French,” appropriate for the study of the “classics,” but not so for works of “modernité” such as Beckett or the products of mass culture (p. 170). “*Explication de texte*” required my fellow students and me to engage in close reading and detailed commenting on texts from the level of the word, through phrase and sentence, to the whole. The approach demanded a fine appreciation of metaphor and allusion and I recall learning how metaphors shape the reader’s interpretation. As Derrida (1967, p. 30) states, “*La métaphore n’est jamais innocente. Elle oriente la recherche et fixe les résultats.*” This seems most apt in that Derrida has science, particularly biology, in mind. While not explicitly adopting a Derridean approach, my fellow students and I learned (slowly) to view texts as part of a system: form or structure was not separable from meaning nor from prior and subsequent texts. (For a more extensive elaboration of Derrida’s conception of “*écriture*,” see Johnson (1993). Zenger and Pill, this volume, also use a systems approach but rather differently.) The practice of both tasks, week-in week-out for six months, succeeded in enabling me to construct “academic” texts that were embedded in a national educational culture that subsequently served me well at university.

Guidance in academic writing at university in the late 1960s and early 1970s was not something that students expected nor that teachers felt a need to provide, unlike the extensive support reported in different contexts in, for example, the chapters by Machura, Dengerscherz, and Ankersborg and Pogner, this vol-

ume. Guidance in my case came through feedback and comments on the papers submitted—and we had to submit a lot of albeit short papers (about four every week)—but these comments did not always translate from one paper to the next, as demonstrated by my erraticism. However, then I had only hazy ideas of academic writing let alone research writing (as emphasized by Castelló, this volume). I began to familiarize myself with the resources available in the small department library at the Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle – Paris III where I was then working (e.g., works of W. S. Allen, A. N. Hornby, and especially W. F. Mackey's *Language teaching analysis* (1965), among others), and later the work of John Swales and Mackay and Mountford's *English for Specific Purposes* (1978). Although my career over the subsequent decade did involve providing support for beginning student writers (as well as professionals), my help was often limited to language guidance and text structure as if the structure was a fixed uncontestable entity which could not be resisted.

During the 1990s, as the number of English-medium programmes expanded at Dutch and European universities, the need to provide academic writing support for both domestic and international students strengthened. Initially I and others saw this in the context of content and language integrated learning (CLIL) since the language concerned could be the L1 or any of the instructional languages used (see Hellekjaer & Wilkinson, 2001, who emphasize the need for collaboration between subject experts and language specialists in this form of instruction, an issue highlighted by several authors in this volume). The scope of collaboration at this time is shown in the example of a bilingual (Dutch and English) arts and culture writing programme that I was involved with (see Wilkinson, 2001), where, over four semesters, students wrote four research-based semester papers. Three were in Dutch and the fourth in English. There were no non-Dutch-speaking students on the programme at that time, international students being limited to Belgians from Dutch-speaking Flanders. Much use was made of the L1 and multilingual sources (a point emphasized in the chapters by Zimmerman, Machura, and Dengerscherz, this volume). Regrettably, the growth of EMI programmes has led to the progressive reduction of Dutch programmes at the faculty concerned, though not the principles of collaboration behind the writing development programme as John Harbord intimates (see Zimmerman, this volume).

These concerns with rapid change in higher education and with content and language integration, whatever the language, underpinned the origins of the ICLHE (Integrating Content and Language in Higher Education) conferences from 2003 and the founding of the ICLHE Association in 2016—an organization that is younger than EATAW. Like EATAW, ICLHE has been concerned with any instructional language, at least in principle. Unlike EAT-

AW, ICLHE does not limit its concerns to a single competence, academic writing literacy. Yet the themes addressed by the authors of this volume are also reflected in publications emerging from ICLHE, especially aspects of professional development (see Melonashi et al., this volume) which have recurred throughout ICLHE publications (see especially Valcke & Wilkinson, 2017; and Dimova & Kling, 2020). The impact of technology and its appropriateness (chapters by Head and Anson, this volume) has, however, only been marginally addressed by the ICLHE community (the 2019 Castelló conference being an exception, publications forthcoming), even though all content and language integrated programmes today depend, to some extent, on various electronic technologies for their success.

One key motivator for me in academic writing was the extent to which I could imagine the local perspective and the potential readers. Zenger and Pill's interviewees strongly emphasized how it was necessary to relate writing to their local context (Lebanon) and that what might be appropriate in the core (western Europe) would not necessarily fit locally. It was a lesson I encountered early in my writing journey when writing my undergraduate thesis on a highly contentious ecological question concerning salt marshes in France. Rather than my home university, my target readers were the local salt panners and environmentalists involved. In a way, writing for a "real" readership ought to come naturally to an academic writer, adding as it does dimensions to the nature of the self (see Melonashi et al., this volume). But as Reinertsen and Thomas (2019) affirm, "we write to de-comfort ourselves" (p. 3). In this Foucauldian approach, writing opens up a path to creating and adding to one's identity, as student, teacher, and researcher, in transdisciplinary, multilingual and transcultural contexts.

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