

## CHAPTER 2

# WORKING WITH POWER: A DIALOGUE ABOUT WRITING SUPPORT USING INSIGHTS FROM PSYCHOTHERAPY

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Harnessing the potential of writing for self-transformation through exchanges with students can be a struggle indeed. Students, it often seems, wish to hand control over their writing to their tutor,<sup>1</sup> who struggles to resist this. Academic literacies perspectives can help elucidate some of the reasons for such tussles, inviting us to consider “hidden” aspects of writing (Brian Street, 2009), such as relationships between writing, subjectivity and power (Romy Clark & Roz Ivanic, 1997), and asking how such relationships may enable or disable the transformative potentialities of writing. Moreover, academic literacies researchers argue, it is through open dialogue that students and tutors may engage with these complex facets of writing (Theresa Lillis, 2006). However, as Lillis suggests, the nature of dialogue itself needs examination if it is to become genuinely transformative, and spaces for writing generated where the ‘creative,’ rather than the ‘compliant’ life might thrive (Sarah Mann, 2001, pp. 9-13).

In this chapter, we construct a dialogue between its co-authors<sup>2</sup> which examines struggles in writing support encounters from a psychological perspective, arguing that transformative exchanges over writing are quasi-therapeutic. Framing writing support as a negotiation of struggles with power and subjectivity, we offer tutors a way of thinking about relationships with students and their writing. We have chosen this dialogic form because it reflects the way our position on these topics has developed through conversation and co-writing, and also resonates with the conversational medium of academic supervision itself. We also think that this form can work as an example of alternative modalities of academic writing that can retain the author’s voice, something students often find difficult.

Our dialogue follows psychotherapists who have argued for the application of certain insights from psychotherapy to pedagogy (Carl Rogers, 1993), and writing tutors who already use psychotherapy to inform their practice (Amanda Baker, 2006;

Phyllis Creme & Celia Hunt, 2002). However, we would avoid conflating the separate spheres of writing support and psychotherapy, simply noting that writing support encounters may take on the flavour of counselling, with issues of self-esteem, rejection and alienation being their everyday stuff (Helen Bowstead, 2009; Lisa Clughen & Matt Connell, 2012; Tamsin Haggis, 2006; Mann, 2001; Barbara Read, Louise Archer & Carol Leathwood, 2003). We aim not to pathologize students but to recognize that difficulties with writing are “normal,” that struggles within writing tutorials are to be expected, and that psychotherapeutic discourse can offer strategies to negotiate them. Attitudes and methods that seek to recognize and redistribute power, such as a realness in the tutor-student exchange, a focus on non-directive modes of language and a reframing of powerlessness through normalizing strategies and non-judgment have as much of a place in writing support as they do in the therapy session. These are just some of the themes we touch on in our dialogue.

Lisa: My writing support sometimes veers toward counselling, especially if students position themselves as stupid or as lacking in what it takes to succeed. I try to bolster their confidence to help them to help themselves, but it’s a struggle to enter into the open, transformative exchange Carl Rogers talks about (1993). Often they just want me to tell them what to do and, understandably, ask me to judge their work, as if I am the final arbiter of truth: “Is that ok?” “Is that better?” They may refuse to own their power, seek to give it to me, and then resist my attempts to give it back to them!

Matt: That sounds like a psychotherapeutic client saying “Doctor, I’m sick; cure me.” The therapist has to carefully avoid reinforcing their passivity and self-pathologization. Have you got an example from your sessions?

Lisa: Well, the opening of sessions often sets the scene for this—a student showed me her writing today and said: “I really need you to fix it for me.” And read this email from a very self-aware student: “I hate to admit this—and I’m embarrassed that I have to admit it—but I think I need to be spoon-fed.”

Matt: “Spoon-fed” is an interesting choice of language psycho-analytically speaking, since it has infantile connotations. Writing tutorials can certainly seem like power struggles over dependency and independence. How do you avoid positioning the tutor as the dispenser of authoritative knowledge and the student as its recipient?

Lisa: Well, passivity is often a response to being rendered passive by, for example, alienating language and the pressure to succeed—so I try to resist becoming another alienating force. I take seriously the language I use so that it does not represent me as author of their text. I aim to foreground the student-writer as governor of their writing and to downplay my own authority: “what would you like to discuss today?” “I can only comment as a reader, you don’t have to accept my points.” “Am I right in thinking that . . .?” I sometimes talk about questions I ask myself when writing “that you may or may not find helpful” such as: “Is this really what I’m trying to say here?” “Does that language really get over my meaning?” This positions them as in being control, emphasising that only they can know what they want to say.

Matt: I’m afraid I find it very hard to resist students’ desire to give away their agency by positioning me as their editor, and too easily get sucked into giving them what they often want—an editorial critique that can “fix” a specific piece of work.

Lisa: But if you do that, or only that, you run the risk of affirming their self-critical tendencies, feeding feelings of powerlessness and dependency. Subsequently, they may feel they can’t do it without you.

Matt: Yes. Negative feelings and self-critique crop up a lot when students are struggling with writing—that’s another reason for the parallels with therapy.

Lisa: What Rogers (1993) says about learning is definitely what I experience in my writing support—students bring the whole self to the exchange about writing, not just a simple request to go over, for example, sentence construction. Have a look at these statements from recent writing support sessions:

I feel too stupid to be here. It’s not a nice feeling at all.

I deleted my work in anger, so I couldn’t send it to you. You get a bit frustrated don’t you, because you feel a bit thick.

I . . . got myself in a right mess. I lost the ability to write so cried for a while.

Matt: You can really feel the pain in these cries for help. I’m sure you need a box of hankies in your office, just like a counsellor! Humanistic psychotherapy tries to avoid reinforcing the client’s

self-pathologizing tendencies, refusing the power of clinical classification and labelling (Thomas Szasz, 1974). In our context the question is: how can we avoid making the student who says they are stupid feel it even more? I wonder if the cognitive mode of academic teaching often side-lines such feelings, exacerbating students' self-condemnation for getting emotional?

Lisa: Oh yes, approaches to writing that are purely rational (for example, conceiving academic support as "skills teaching") often ignore the relationship between writing and emotion. But emotions affect both sides of the support encounter. Being "real" in the exchange by, for example, owning one's feelings about it could mean that while students might complain of their frustrations if the tutor will not edit their work for them, tutors might have to admit to their own feelings of irritation if students believe they are, or should be, telling them what to write, rather than engaging in an open exchange about both of their responses to the student's text (Rogers, 1993).

Matt: And to other people's texts and discourses? I'm interested in the way in which language use can sustain or disturb power in the writing exchange—those impediments to writing caused by engagements with alienating academic language. Tutors don't even have to assume the mantle of this intimidating linguistic power, it unconsciously colonizes the space between teachers and learners, being always already part of the cultural imaginary around education.

Lisa: One student told me that her strategy for coping with her tutor was to use dictionary.com afterwards because she "didn't have a clue what she was trying to say to me." She didn't feel able to ask at the time, due to the fear of looking stupid. Here's another student emailing me their experience of reading: "I've read all these theory books and they sound posh and are just too hard to understand. If I don't pick at each sentence, I won't have a clue what they are on about."

Matt: Here, students are imagining that it's different for us, whereas in reality, everyone struggles at one level or another with "theory books." I have to pick at each sentence too, and I find that if I explain this to students, it can help to transform their self-perceptions, mitigating their fantasies about our power. Radical psychotherapy can work like this too—one of the insights of

“co-counselling” was that empathy can be generated more easily when professional hierarchies are eroded rather than reinforced (Mann, 2001).

Lisa: I sometimes explicitly give up my power by mentioning my own struggles with writing and what I do to cope with them, then ask students if they can suggest anything to help me.

Matt: Even Freud, a bad offender when it comes to jargon and power-bound interaction, knew that the struggles of the so-called “mentally ill” are only exaggerated versions of the everyday struggles that dog us all. If we can normalize what students are feeling, that helps them enter the community of scholars as potential equals, not competing supplicants.

Lisa: Yes. Normalizing both feelings and the typical gamut of unproductive writing behaviors can be a potentially powerful strategy. A PhD student who said she wanted me to tell her “how to write efficiently and effectively” told me that she was panicking that she was not a good writer as some days she could write a thousand words and other days none at all. It was as if she was looking for a magic formula for writing, something outside of herself (Bowstead, 2009). Instead, I drew on ideas about mindfulness and encouraged her gently to see this just as a part of her own writing process (and said it was mine too, in fact)—it was neither good nor bad, but just the way it was at that moment. My hope was that her self-diagnosis (“bad writer”) and the panic that ensued from it might be assuaged by establishing a climate of non-judgment. You’ve mentioned R. D. Laing when we’ve talked about this before, haven’t you?

Matt: Yes—he’s the big figure when it comes to avoiding the pathologizing gaze, normalizing distress and trying to avoid the pitfall of therapy becoming a lesson in power-bound conformity to an existing social order (Laing, 1967).

Lisa: But Matt, these students DO have to conform in order to succeed, they aren’t living in a cultural free-for-all. The university and their employers determine which language games win and which lose.

Matt: Yes, but if they can become conscious of this on their own terms with their integrity intact, rather than feeling “retarded” because it doesn’t come automatically, as one student shockingly

described it, then that's a big thing. This may mean they need to find the sense hidden in what they are trying, but failing, to articulate in their writing, and to present it a different way. Laing provided a lot of analysis of distorted communications—especially a peculiar type of jumbled psychotic discourse colloquially known as “schizophrenese” or “word-salad” (Laing, 1965). Traditional psychiatry is uninterested in this discourse, seeing it simply as a symptom of a diseased brain. Following Freud's (1991) notion that all symptoms had a sense, Laing instead tried to tease out what meanings underpinned the confusing speech (Laing, 1965).

Lisa: Aren't you coming close to pathologizing students here? We don't want to suggest they are psychotic!

Matt: Of course not! Firstly, I mean this as an analogy, as a metaphor. But secondly, Laing was, precisely, trying to avoid the pathologizing of psychosis itself—where some would dismiss it as nonsense, he reframed it as a “normal” expression of the human head and heart, and as a communication strategy that made sense to the person deploying it.

Lisa: So, applied here, can we say that there must always be a logic behind even the most confused writing, the kind of text that tutors may highlight with a big question mark, if only we could find out what that logic is?

Matt: Right! In Laing's case studies the jumbled discourse is indicative of repressed and conflicted personality fragments. In a much less extreme way, jumbled writing may be indicative of conflicts in students' understanding and expressions. The further twist is that Laing suggests the “word-salad” may operate as a defensive measure when the sufferer feels pressurized or misunderstood by those exerting power over them (Laing, 1965). I think sometimes there's a parallel here with student writing—students may be trying to mimic a scholarly register as a defensive reaction to criticism, but trying to sound clever to avoid seeming stupid usually only makes it worse.

Lisa: So, the task is to somehow negotiate the power while knowing that the required language game cannot be completely avoided—just as those experiencing psychosis in the end have to find ways to talk using the rules of conventional discourse.

Empathy is the key to this—Rogers’ (1989, pp. 225-226) “unconditional positive regard,” where we refrain from judging the student no matter what they say, is central, but it’s a struggle to maintain it: when confronted with very frustrating writing, or confused students asking me to sort it out for them, value judgments—and even anger—can be hard to avoid. I have to be constantly mindful of the suffering individual and strive to remain compassionate.

Matt: It’s interesting that you say “negotiate” rather than “remove” the power. With that distinction, I think you are opening up a critique of the sort of theory which frames power simply as something to be escaped.

Lisa: Do you mean the Nietzschean criticism deployed by Foucault (1988), which he aims at Freudo-Marxists and existentialists like Laing?

Matt: Yes, bang on—for Foucault, there’s a naiveté to theories which claim power is a purely negative thing, operating via constraint. For the theorists he criticizes, power always stops things happening, it limits freedom, and they want us to strive to remove it so that freedom can blossom free of its baleful effect.

Lisa: Whereas in his Nietzschean model, power is constitutive, it creates things ...

Matt: ... and, moreover, it simply cannot be “removed”: it can only be re-deployed, swapped for another form of power or channelled in another way. We could say it has to be owned, consciously exploited and used, rather than refused. The refusal to own power may simply be a sort of passive-aggressive strategy—in fact, a disavowed form of power. Maybe we have to help students work with power because, as you said, we simply can’t remove power when it comes to academic writing. We might harbour a hope that students’ personal growth can be central to the university experience, à la Rogers, or that we can help them shrug off the shackles of conformity and develop their true self, à la Laing—but if we overdo it, we may be giving them rope to hang themselves with. If we removed academic structure and expected “freedom” to emerge, it would just be a mess!

Lisa: Yes. On the one hand, it is certainly important to critique the dominating force of didactic academic socialization, which

can deny students the right to their own voice. For that, the strategies of humanistic psychotherapy for opening up dialogue and empowering students through an understanding of the complex role of emotion and self-identity are really useful. But on the other hand, we can't simply throw the baby out with the bathwater, and can accept that scholarly frameworks and writing conventions can be an enabling force too, a form of power that can be appropriated and used. For example, writing conventions are not just a straight-jacket, they're a means of achieving clarity: if you can learn them, you can communicate more powerfully.

Matt: So, what we need is for writing support to function as a sort of "critical socialization" that helps to foster the students' nascent membership of the academic community. We can help students to find the parts of academic culture where they feel at home, and to resist those parts of the culture that alienate them.

Lisa: And the task of academic literacies work is to do this concretely, not only at the level of theory. So, for example, other ways of writing academically might be offered that would allow for a freer engagement with academic ideas. Perhaps what we are doing here is one model for this: writing an academic analysis as a conversation can allow for a discussion that is research-informed, critical, and also more immediately inclusive of the writer's own voice, as it allows for a language that is closer to this voice. This isn't necessarily the case with the formal language required by the academic essay.

## NOTES

1. By "tutor" we mean anyone in HE, whether they work as a subject lecturer or within a writing development service, who discusses students' writing with them.
2. Lisa is a Spanish subject lecturer and also leads a School/Faculty-level academic support service, and thus has a specialist writing development role. Matt is a lecturer in the Social Theory subject area.

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