

## CHAPTER 42.

# SECTION ESSAY: REFLECTING ON WHAT CAN BE GAINED FROM COMPARING MODELS OF ACADEMIC WRITING PROVISION

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*The purpose of this section essay is to consider a central question raised by the Writing Programs Worldwide anthology and articulated in Chris Thaiss' "Introduction" to this volume. This question is, to what extent is it useful for those working in higher education to be aware of writing practices and models of academic writing provision in place at higher education institutions in other national contexts? To explore this question, I will then use examples of academic development work from profiles in this project from universities in the UK, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, Belgium, and France.*

My own earliest reflections on how academic writing is learned and taught at the tertiary level in different countries occurred when I was an American exchange student at a British university in the 1980s.<sup>1</sup> Having been allocated reading lists and assigned essays to write, I was told by the academics teaching the courses I was taking, as well as by fellow students, that as far as writing was concerned I just needed "to get on with it." I found this experience, during which I grappled to understand what was expected of me as a writer and throughout which I struggled to write, to be in marked contrast to the pedagogy of the composition classes I had been required to take in my first year of study at a US university. In these classes, assignment structures, expectations, and argumentation were discussed and drafting processes scaffolded and monitored.

The experience of being a student writer in a foreign higher education system in which writing was not visibly taught proved to be a pivotal moment for me. Because of this experience, I came to recognise the need for students to become

independent writers and to realise that students can be assisted in maturing as academic writers through explicit instruction and guided practice in writing. I carried this experience of learning to write academically, and of understanding that students can be assisted in learning to write academically, back with me to the US university at which I was studying; I became a peer writing tutor at the university's writing center while completing my undergraduate degree. As a student writing tutor, I began to understand more fully how fundamental writing support for university students is, and how empowering for students individualised attention to their writing can be (Borg & Deane, 2010). As an American writing tutor, I also realised that writing teaching, or "writing development work" as I later came to know it in the British context, can aid tutors and teachers themselves in improving as writers, communicators, and critical thinkers. (see, for example, Alpen, Breford & Tschirpke (2011); Devet, 2011; and Girgensohn, 2011).

Reflecting on my experience, however, led me to understand that the solution to supporting students as writers in various national higher education contexts was not simply to import models of writing instruction. As an American student in a UK university, I had not been looking for a composition class, but for guidance on expectations for writing in a higher education culture in which, at that time, students learned to write (or didn't) through acculturation.

When, in the 1990s, I began working in a UK university as a researcher and teacher of Academic Writing, I learned that this topic was not just something with which I was preoccupied, but that international interest in comparing models of writing instruction was growing. Professional organisations such as the European Association for the Teaching of Academic Writing (EATAW), the European Writing Centres Association (EWCA), and the Writing Development in Higher Education Network (WDHE) were being formed, and their biennial conferences, as well as the 2001 University of Warwick Writing Programme conference on "Teaching Writing in Higher Education," were attracting international delegates who were interested in sharing models and practices for teaching writing.<sup>2</sup> This interest was also beginning to surface at the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCCs), the major US-based conference for college and university writing teachers and scholars that has been held annually since 1949, as shown, for example, in the panel "Transnational Goals and Practices of Composition: An International Exchange" (Ede et al., 2002) and the half-day workshop "Changing Places: An International Exchange on the Teaching of College Writing" (Ede et al., 2003). Intellectual curiosity was also leading to collaborations on cross-cultural funded writing research and development projects such as the "Developing Academic Literacy in Context" (DALiC) project, "a comparative

curriculum development exercise [. . .] involving a group of academic literacy specialists in the UK, the US and Australia” (Purser et al., 2008), which focused on the application, in different higher education contexts, of an embedded model of academic literacy teaching and learning that had emerged in Australian higher education (Skillen & Mahoney, 1997; Skillen et al., 1998 and 1999).

Articles published in English comparing both pedagogical and institutional approaches to developing students’ writing in higher education in various countries were also beginning to appear. Examples of these, whose comparative nature is evident in their titles, include, “Learning from—Not Duplicating—US Composition Theory and Practice” (Mullin, 2006), “If not Rhetoric and Composition, then What? Teaching Teachers to Teach Writing” (Murray, 2006), “Peering Across the Pond: the Role of Students in Developing Other Students’ Writing in the US and UK” (Devet et al., 2006), and “Writing Center Tutor Training: What is Transferable across Academic Cultures?” (Santa, 2009). Articles such as these explored and questioned specific instances of “importing” and “exporting” writing instruction models from one national higher education culture to another.<sup>3</sup>

In her article “‘Internationalization’ and Composition Studies: Reorienting the Discourse,” Donahue (2009) further theorised the “import/export” concept of cultural exchange of writing pedagogies and provision. Citing Harbord (2008), Donahue acknowledged the attraction for “foreign experts” to share their expertise with colleagues in other countries, as well as the attraction for many colleagues of turning to foreign expertise to obtain advice on writing pedagogy, theory, and programme administration (Donahue, 2009, p. 222). She argued, however, that teachers and theorists of writing must move “toward equal trade models of exchange” (Donahue, 2009, p. 231), and that, following Muchiri et al. (1995), we must “make claims in contextualized fashion, to remind [our]selves of what [we] take for granted,” “become more self-conscious about the ways we use terminology, and resist an import-export model for an equitable exchange” model that puts us “in a learning position with respect to our colleagues around the globe” (Donahue, 2009, p. 232).<sup>4</sup>

As one of the co-editors of *Writing Programs Worldwide*, I have kept this set of principles in mind when offering feedback to authors on their profile essays and in learning from the many ways of teaching writing and approaches to organising the teaching of writing outlined in the profiles. My purpose in the remainder of this short essay is to investigate further the potential usefulness of exchanging cross-cultural writing development theory and practice by exploring themes and examples from the profile essays I commissioned. These profiles report on academic writing development work in universities in the UK, Ireland, Australia,

New Zealand, Belgium, and France. While some profiles focus on a particular sphere of activity, others discuss an array of writing development activities.

## **WRITING DEVELOPMENT IN RESPONSE TO HIGHER EDUCATION EXPANSION**

One theme articulated in almost all of the profiles is that writing development is often called for—by students, by academics and professional staff in universities, by university managers, and by governments—in response to the massification of higher education and the increase in heterogeneity of the student body that such expansion brings.<sup>5</sup> Many profiles begin with a statement of how their institution's student body has grown and become much more diverse in terms of increased participation of indigenous people; foreign students; people from a variety of social classes, races, and ethnic groups; distance-learners; and students with varied experiences of educational preparation. Writing about AUT University, New Zealand, John Bitchener notes that AUT University “has a multi-national and multi-cultural population: 42% pakehas (white New Zealanders), 10% Maori (indigenous New Zealanders), 11% Pasifika (Pacific Islanders), 27% Asians (East and South Asian countries) and 10% others,” and that “[t]his range of backgrounds means that the university must cater for the diverse needs of its equally diverse student population” and “accept responsibility for ensuring that students have every chance of succeeding.” Similarly, Marie-Christine Pollet notes that students at the Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium, are characterized by “a large diversity in their geographic, cultural and social origins” as well as in their educational backgrounds.

Karyn Gonano and Peter Nelson, writing from Queensland University of Technology, Australia, explain that their government's Bradley Review, *Transforming Australia's Higher Education System*, which was put into effect in 2009 “to widen participation in universities,” has resulted “in an increasingly diverse range of students with an equally significant range of experiences.” Gonano and Nelson discuss the impact of the internationalisation agenda in Australian higher education in terms of the development of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing support programmes at Queensland University of Technology. They identify, as does Mary Deane's and my profile of writing provision at Coventry University, England, the need for writing support not just for non-native speakers of English, but for all students.

That calls for writing development have been occasioned by growth in student numbers in higher education and by erosion of homogeneity in student populations is a claim that appears over and over again in *Academic Writing* and

Composition scholarship. Many scholars have written about this phenomenon as a catalyst for the development of Composition teaching and writing centers in US universities (see, for example, Boquet, 1999; Carino, 1995; Russell, 2002; and Yaher & Murdick, 1991), while Skillen (2006) has argued that as a result of “the massification of the tertiary education system in the 1970s and 1980s” in Australia, the assumption that writing instruction was not necessary because “students at this level of education already had adequate writing skills acquired during secondary school” was questioned, and learning centres were set up in Australian universities (Skillen, 2006, p. 140). This claim has also been made in relation to the development, from the 1990s, of Academic Writing as a teaching and research field in UK higher education (Ganobcsik-Williams, 2006, p. xxi-5), and appears in many articles by European writing teachers and scholars in the Autumn 2011 inaugural issue of the *Journal of Academic Writing*, the journal of the European Association for the Teaching of Academic Writing.

## WRITING CENTRES AND WRITING PROGRAMMES WITH MULTIPLE FUNCTIONS

A second theme apparent in the profiles is that of writing programmes and writing centres outside of the US taking on multiple functions. As Santa (2009) points out: “Most American writing centers stand in support of writing programs which include composition or writing intensive course instruction as mandatory features of an undergraduate curriculum. In most Continental writing centers, the writing centre *is the writing program*” (Santa, 2009, p.3).

That the writing centre is the hub for writing development work is also true of the first writing centre in Irish higher education. The Regional Writing Centre at the University of Limerick, Ireland, discussed in the profile by Íde O’Sullivan and Lawrence Cleary, names its priorities as supporting student writers, supporting postgraduate students in developing their writing and in training for tutoring writing, “faculty development on best practices for teaching with writing” and, in conjunction with the University’s Centre for Teaching and Learning, academic staff development in scholarly writing. The Centre for Academic Writing (CAW) at Coventry University, England, as depicted in the profile by Deane and Ganobcsik-Williams, is also an example of a writing centre that functions as a department of writing studies. CAW’s mission statement comprises a “whole institution” writing development commitment to supporting student writing, to carrying out staff development in the teaching of writing, and to facilitating staff and postgraduate writing for publication. The Academic Achievement Teaching Unit (AATU), at the University of Dundee, Scotland,

detailed in Kathleen McMillan's profile, is classified as a teaching unit rather than a writing centre, but offers, through a partnership with Fellows from the UK's Royal Literary Fund Fellowship Scheme, one-to-one writing tuition for students, bespoke workshops in which AATU staff collaborate with academics to teach academic skills, and other types of writing and skills teaching.<sup>6</sup>

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF NATIONAL AND LOCAL INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXTS FOR WRITING DEVELOPMENT**

Another theme common to all of the profiles is the importance of national and local institutional contexts for writing development. Many authors review their choices of pedagogical approaches and emphasise the need to fit writing pedagogies and writing development provision to particular contexts. Pollet, for example, notes that the Center for University Learning at the Université Libre de Bruxelles was established as a result of an internal institutional report and that its work has been affirmed by a national government mandate in "working to promote the success of students." Pollet explains how the Center's teaching practices have evolved through "normative" and "technicist" approaches into a "pragmatic" approach to providing linguistic and writing support for first-year, French-speaking students.

Another example of the emphasis on contextualising writing development is shown by Lisa Emerson, in her profile of academic writing teaching at Massey University, New Zealand. "Becoming an ethnographer: understanding the context," writes Emerson, who became involved in writing development work when a "colleague had returned from Sabbatical in the US fired up with a mission to start a writing centre to improve students' writing skills." Having subscribed to a US-based writing center listserv, Emerson notes that often:

. . . reading the email discussions felt more like eavesdropping on a conversation on an alien planet. The conversation may have been in English but the largely American cultural context in which it took place was beyond my comprehension: the terminology was opaque, and the assumption that a whole institutional infrastructure around writing was in place was unimaginable at that time in a New Zealand context.

Emerson notes, therefore, that she had to "invent" her role as a writing tutor and to become, in Elaine Maimon's words, an "ethnographer" of her home

campus (McLeod & Soven, 1992, p. xi) in order to build “a New Zealand writing programme” informed by international scholarship but emerging “out of the context of a New Zealand university” and “carefully crafted to meet the needs of New Zealand students.”

Emerson’s experiences and observations correspond with those of Santa (2009), who found it inappropriate to use US Composition textbooks and writing tutor guides to teach and support Bulgarian, Romanian, Albanian, and Serbian university students and writing tutors in Bulgaria. As Santa (2009) argues, “[a]n increasingly international writing center practice demands elucidation of theory and practice which might best facilitate the work of new tutors and better conform to local academic practices and needs.” (Santa, 2009, p. 1).

## **CROSS-FERTILISATION OF WRITING THEORIES AND PRACTICES**

The concept of contextualised writing development relates closely to the final theme of the profiles that I would like to highlight, the importance of cross-fertilisation of writing theories and practices between higher education cultures. Within this group of profiles, the dominant and default provider of expertise about writing development is the US; this is, arguably, inevitable given that the US has well-developed programs, departments, and centers in which explicit tertiary writing teaching and tutoring takes place, underpinned by a long tradition of writing research and scholarship.<sup>7</sup> Many authors explain how they have been influenced by US theories and practices of teaching writing. In addition to my own and Emerson’s experiences as discussed above, Theresa McConlogue, Sally Mitchell, and Kelly Peake note that the Thinking Writing programme team at Queen Mary, University of London drew “inspiration from Writing in the Disciplines at Cornell University;” Jonathan Worley credits the influence of a US writing center colleague in developing the writing centre and peer tutoring programme at St. Mary’s University College, Belfast; and Lawrence Cleary and Íde O’Sullivan recount how, prior to setting up the writing centre at the University of Limerick, a visiting professor from the US met with their working group for “a week-long consultation” including “workshops on writing” and an exploration of how “university-wide support could be translated into a systematic, comprehensive approach to writing while addressing individual, disciplinary concerns.”

For non-US-based writing teachers and researchers, one way in which to move beyond or alongside the US influence is to seek to learn more from one’s own regionally- and nationally-based colleagues. In his section essay in this volume, Gerd Bräuer indicates the value of the collegial regional and local net-

works that have enabled close collaboration in developing writing centers in Austria, Germany, Liechtenstein, and Switzerland. As indicated by Pollet and by Françoise Boch and Cathy Frier's profile of the Université Stendhal, Grenoble III, France, a community of exchange between writing teacher-researchers also exists in Belgium and France.<sup>8</sup> In the UK, the WDHE network and groups such as the Interuniversity Academic Literacies Research Group (Aclits), as well as visits and discussions between writing development colleagues at various universities, have helped to create and maintain a community of writing teachers, scholars, and programme/centre managers.<sup>9</sup>

Another way to learn about writing development more broadly is to seek and compare expertise from a variety of cultural contexts. When setting up the Centre for Academic Writing at Coventry University, for example, I engaged a US writing center/ Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) colleague and an Australian learning centre colleague as joint consultants,<sup>10</sup> and the writing centre benefited from my opportunity to learn about US writing programs, writing centers, and WAC administration as well as about Australian learning centres and models for organising the teaching of writing. On a larger scale, Pollet's profile essay suggests a cross-fertilisation of theory and theoretical traditions between Belgium and France (Littéracies Universitaires) and the UK (Academic Literacies),<sup>11</sup> while O'Sullivan and Cleary cite Academic Literacies and American Composition and Rhetoric perspectives as important influences on the teaching and research approaches taken at their Regional Writing Centre in Ireland.

Scholarship giving insight into writing pedagogies and ways of organising writing development in various cultures is increasing and becoming more widely available through publications such as the *Writing Programs Worldwide* anthology. By reviewing the group of profiles under consideration here, for instance, I have come to realise that there is an increasing focus on the writing of postgraduate students and academic staff. This focus includes doctoral thesis-writing as discussed by John Bitchener in his profile of AUT University, Auckland, New Zealand, as well as postgraduate and academics' development in writing for publication as discussed in the profiles about the writing centres at Coventry University and the University of Limerick.<sup>12</sup> As a result of Boch and Frier's profile of a writing research teaching intervention project, I have also gained insight into the concept of "scientific" writing research prevalent in European higher education.

To what extent, therefore, is it useful for those working in higher education to be aware of writing practices and models of academic writing provision in place at higher education institutions in other national contexts? In this essay, I have responded to this question through my reflection upon how the opportunity, as a student, to begin to compare writing instruction and ways of organis-

ing writing provision within universities in two different countries resulted in furthering my own development as a student writer and led me to recognise the benefits of supporting students with their writing in higher education. I have also reflected on the question of the value of cross-cultural awareness of writing pedagogies and institutional approaches to writing development by discussing four main themes and an array of examples taken from a selection of profile essays in this anthology. As these themes and examples show, there are now common inter- and trans-national issues being faced in academia that would suggest the benefit of comparing approaches, both within regions and nations and with other higher education cultures. Transnationalism is accelerating, and writing developers have much to learn from—and much to contribute to—other contexts for teaching writing.

## NOTES

1. Donahue (2009) points out that a “broadly ignored area of [C]omposition work is that of US monolingual students’ experiences when they go overseas to study or work and find themselves in universities and workplaces with different rhetorical, discursive, and sociolinguistic expectations, whether that work is being done in English or in another language. An ‘English is English’ mindset seems uniquely inappropriate for current international contexts” (p. 218). The personal reflections offered in this essay are a contribution to this area of Composition scholarship.
2. The WDHE was founded in 1994. The first, joint, EATAW/EWCA conference took place in 2001. For more information on these organisations and on the Warwick Writing Programme conference, see Ganobcsik-Williams (2006), pages xxiv-xxv.
3. Articles by Mullin (2006), as well as Heyda (2006) also cautioned that writing pedagogies and models of organising writing instruction within colleges and universities may not be appropriate for the contexts within which they are operating, let alone for implementation elsewhere. Heyda (2006), for example, argues that the “sentimental” tradition of required first-year composition classes in US universities is ineffective and that US institutions’ focus on this model hinders the resourcing and development of other, he contends, more productive approaches to working with students on their writing.
4. While Donahue addresses her remarks in this article in *College Composition and Communication* to US Composition and Rhetoric teachers and scholars, I believe that these points apply to all writing developers.
5. For many higher education systems, “universalisation” rather than “massification” is the appropriate term. For a definition of the difference between “mass” and “universal” educational systems, see Peter Scott (1995, p. 2).

6. While other UK writing centres typically are engaged in a variety of activities, the Writing Centre at St. Mary's University College, Belfast, Northern Ireland, as discussed in Jonathan Worley's profile, focuses its expertise on peer tutoring in writing.
7. As Donahue (2009), citing Muchiri et al. (1995) points out, however, "[t]he absence of an 'industry' of first-year composition" in countries outside of the United States "is not the absence of the study and teaching of higher education writing," and some writing scholars have traced the histories of higher education writing instruction in various countries back hundreds of years (p. 222).
8. Donahue (2009) makes reference to this field of the study of university writing as 'la didactique de l'écrit' (p. 222).
9. Established in 1993, Aclits is convened by Mary Scott at the Institute of Education, University of London.
10. These colleagues were Professor Joan Mullin and Dr. Jan Skillen.
11. See the Call for Proposals for the "University Literacies" conference, held at the Université Charles de Gaulle, Lille III, 2-4 September 2010: [http://evenements.univ-lille3.fr/litteracies-universitaires/en/?Call\\_for\\_proposals](http://evenements.univ-lille3.fr/litteracies-universitaires/en/?Call_for_proposals), which observes that "[r]esearch about university reading and writing practices, developed in French-speaking countries and in Europe in the field of 'didactics' in the past dozen years, are coming more and more into dialogue with this kind of research in the U.K. field of *Academic Literacies* . . . [and] the US field of *Composition Studies*."
12. For further discussion of thesis-writing pedagogies and approaches to supporting the scholarly writing of postgraduate students and academics, see, for example, Murray (2002, 2009) and Lillis and Curry (2006, 2010).

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