# Statement: Designing writing space(s): a local and collaborative approach

## Background

Our study, the *~~Writing Spaces~~* project, is a collaboration between three lecturers at Middlesex University: two members of the Academic Writing and Language (AWL) team, and the programme leader of BA Interior Architecture. The project began with an opportunity for AWL to base itself in a new space[[1]](#footnote-1), the design of which, we felt strongly, should be the product of research, rather than personal preferences. Our aims were to better understand the spatial needs of the Mdx writing community, and to help to design space that recognises (and celebrates) the centrality of writing at the University. To these ends we considered the project a piece of action research, following a human-centred design methodology, starting with investigations of the perceptions and practices of this community. The project soon grew to focus more widely on the whole campus.

## Contextual factors

Space in Middlesex is very limited and much of it is arguably not designed or used as effectively as it could be, so the University recently set up a *Learning Landscapes* project to investigate effective design and use of learning spaces. This presents us with an opportunity to tie our research interests in with an institutional drive, and gives us a platform to influence University planning. The *~~Writing Spaces~~* project has shown us an ambitious writing community at the University, but one that is not served as well as it could be by the space available to it for writing.

## Policies

An educational policy that impacts on the *~~Writing Spaces~~* project is *Widening Participation* (WP), a UK government initiative to make Higher Education accessible to less advantaged young people. Middlesex University has traditionally been successful in recruiting such students (Blackman 2017) from its super-diverse London context. The work that AWL does in developing the writing of our students has to take into account the diverse relationships they have with English, the UK education system (particularly HE) and writing; and the diverse forms of knowledge, and means of knowledge generation they engage with. The design of our ~~Writing Spaces~~ interventions must also take this diversity into account.

# Designing writing space(s): a local and collaborative approach

by

Peter Thomas, Senior Lecturer of Academic Writing and Language, Middlesex University, London (UK)

Francesca Murialdo, Programme Leader Interior Architecture, Middlesex University, London (UK)

Ruth Bonazza, Lecturer of Academic Writing and Language, Middlesex University, London (UK)

## Introduction

This article reports on a research project into the development of writing spaces, which integrates perspectives from the fields of Interior Architecture and Academic Writing and attempts to respond to the learning experiences and the spatial and emotional needs of student and staff writers at Middlesex University[[2]](#footnote-2). The idea emerged in different ongoing conversations in our academic community regarding how to best engage students around the topic of shared campus space as well as how to encourage the visibility and recognition of the centrality of writing at university. The paper draws on findings from the ~~WritingSpaces~~ project, an ongoing research project led by an interior architect and two academic writing specialists at Middlesex. After briefly outlining the project, we explore our community’s perceptions of their writing processes and their relations to space, the relationship between shared university space and writers’ suggestions for encouraging a sense of belonging. We conclude by proposing that the diversity of the university’s writing community calls for dynamic and diverse responses.

## The context

### Diversity at Mdx

Located in “superdiverse” London (Vertovec, 2007), Middlesex has highlighted “promoting diversity and inclusiveness” in its core values (Middlesex University, n. d.), leading to an emphasis on reaching out to less advantaged student populations. In comments critical of the stratification of class that can be perpetuated by British higher education, the University’s vice-chancellor, Tim Blackman, argues for higher education institutions to integrate and celebrate individuals with different backgrounds (Blackman, 2017). Using data published by the Office for Fair Access, Blackman notes that 56% of Middlesex students are “the children of small employers and own-account workers, lower grade supervisors and technicians, and semi-routine and routine workers,” which is considerably higher than many other UK universities (Blackman, 2017, p. 26). A high diversity of ethnic backgrounds, economic backgrounds and previous educational experience characterises the student body.

### Mdx responses to issues related to diversity

Read, et al. (2003) review some of the literature on issues that many- but not all- students in post-1992 institutions face: including for instance students who are working, students with young families, and students who are homeless. The circumstances of such students can have negative impact on their progression and retention. Middlesex has taken considerable steps to address issues often associated with a diverse student cohort, including putting in place systems to encourage as full as possible engagement with the curriculum.

One key part of this system at Middlesex is provision focused on the development of academic writing and language, made by the Learning Enhancement Team (LET). Language, communication and ultimately the practice of writing at Middlesex, is an expression of its diversity that includes a high percentage of two or more languages speakers. Within our 200-person research sample, over 85% of student respondents reported being bi- or multi-lingual.

For several years the provision made by LET has been informed very significantly by Academic Literacies literature (e.g. Lea & Street 1998; Lillis 2003; Lea & Street 2006; Lea 2004), particularly regarding: the importance of research-informed teaching; an understanding that writing is a social practice; the need for context-sensitivity in the situating of developmental literacy provision; the adoption of a critical position in relation to the institutional and disciplinary structures within which student writing takes place. The research outlined in this paper is a product of our attempts to work following such principles.

### Writing & our collaborative approach

In this project, we recognise that writing is an activity central to both our private and public spheres, our personal and professional development. The combination of content knowledge from Interior Architecture and Academic Writing has been fruitful, as both subjects have a deep appreciation for the importance of writing and an understanding of the process that enables ideas to be found, held, explored and further developed. This project also links to our research and professional activities, which have strong writing themes[[3]](#footnote-3), and fits into a wider discourse at Middlesex regarding the development of space on campus.

### Writing & space

We also understand that difficulties writers may face can be traced to many different causes, one of which is a lack of space to enable concentration and inspiration. The Middlesex campus in London, despite improvements to the provision of places and opportunities for writers, still has a limited amount of space.

### Learning Landscapes

The provision of an environment that enables individuals to explore and develop ideas is a priority for both those tasked with designing and maintaining campus learning spaces and staff working with students face-to-face. However, it is suggested that the designers of university spaces often do not have teaching backgrounds or roles, which could significantly impact the use of the space (UCISA, 2016, p. 7). Therefore, many universities, including Middlesex, have set up *learning landscape* projects to redress this by opening constructive dialogue between designers and users of university space about formal and informal learning spaces at or connected to the university, pedagogy and space management (Neary, et al., 2010). A report on these projects identifies three types of space that should be re-considered; core space, or areas that are specifically designed and branded for university purposes; ﬂexi-space, or areas that can be used for initiating projects or learning; and ‘just in time’ space, which caters to shorter needs such as rentals for functions (Neary *et al*., 2010, p. 7). The Middlesex *Learning Landscapes* project has been running for almost 2 years. Our ~~WritingSpaces~~ project is not technically part of, or funded by *Learning Landscapes*, but there is interest in the members of both project teams in the liaison and collaboration.

## The project

### Aims & expected outcomes

The initial aim of the ~~WritingSpaces~~ project was centred on defining the spatial manifestation of the significance of writing for the University. The expected outcome is to better understand the spatial needs of the Middlesex community, to help to design space(s) that recognize and celebrate the centrality of writing as process and practice.

We align this research with: the need for specialised and situated writing and literacy provision that responds to its contexts (Donahue 2009; Harbord 2010; Ganobcsik-Williams 2012); calls for those in writing development to be more critical of their “grand narratives” (Grutsch-McKinney 2013) or tendencies (Petit 1997; Bouquet 2012) and how these might affect how we use / don’t use space; and criticisms of the reproduction of and lack of reflection on educational design (e.g. Higgins, et al. 2005).

### Writing & Space

This project recognises writing as a complex process of generating and synthesising thoughts and emotions, done individually or in collaboration. It is rigorous and creative, as Carruthers (1998, p. 5) writes, “people don’t have ideas, they make them.”

We recognise the diversity of text types (from code, to essays, to email correspondence, to articles), the processes by which these are written, and tools used to do this. We also see writing as a social practice and a shared activity that brings together different people in the generation and reading of a text. Most importantly for this project, we see writing as a highly contextualised and physical process that is deeply connected to place.

For the purposes of this project the term *space* encompasses not only locations in the university, but also private and public spaces including those in the home and in the city.

## Methodology

### Action research & Human-centred design

The approach used in this project was a combination of action research, or practitioner and practice led investigations that include elements of critical reflection and activism (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006; McNiff, 2013) and human-centred design theory- a process leading to “shared design”, which acknowledges the influences and input of both the “designers” and the “clients” (Ideo, 2009).

We found that both approaches acknowledge, challenge and then try to alter the often asymmetrical relationship between “researchers” and “participants”. A strength of action research is its lack of formalised steps, which we found fits quite well with the more practically oriented, human-centred design (see fig 1).



Figure 1. Diagram showing relationship between Human-centered Design and Action Research

In simple terms, human-centred design is a process of repeated phases of divergent and convergent thinking, with a progressively narrower focus to each cycle / phase of the process. This narrowing can be seen in light of the spiral / cyclical nature of action research: including planning, action, reflection, and then further planning (Koshy, 2005).

### Stage 1 Review of literature

We also wanted to acknowledge and challenge the dominant paradigms from our different subject areas as well as our own assumptions and tacit knowledge that we form from our positions as lecturers at Middlesex. In the first stage of the project, the preparation stage, we spent extensive time looking through previous research, conducted by the LET, into what kinds of developmental provision was needed by students. We then discussed our own writing experiences, and shared literature on educational spaces, writing centres, design theory and more in order to understand what explicit and implicit understandings of writing and space that we were bringing to the table.

### Stage 2 Questionnaire

In stage two, a moment of convergence, we used these discussions to inform the creation of our online questionnaires to gain a holistic understanding of the type of writing and writing processes of Middlesex University students and staff. 209 people took part.

To break down the participant data, we had 141 undergraduate students, 23 post graduate and doctoral students and 45 staff members. The breakdown according to school shows that we had a mix of respondents, although not as wide in terms of disciplinary spread as we had hoped[[4]](#footnote-4).

The questionnaire was divided into 5 sections:

* Personal information and background
* Text types and confidence
* Individual v. collaborative writing
* Process
* Preferred spaces & tools

#### Findings from questionnaire

As can be guessed, text types vary, as do processes.

Participants that are newer to university (foundation and undergraduates) tend to prefer more traditional spaces such as campus libraries and empty classrooms, while there is more experimentation with different spaces later on.

Tools included computers, but a significant number also use pen and paper during different stages in the process. This use of pen and paper is often minimised by current educational space planners.

### Stage 3 Focus Groups

We expanded on the questionnaire data in the third stage of the project: a series of mixed stakeholder (both staff member and student) focus groups and pop-up focus groups (small, semi-guided discussions). In total, we had 25 participants, roughly half students and half staff.

We used these opportunities to probe what space qualities are considered favourable to the writing process. Initial preferences about permeability, light, tools, space and atmosphere were challenged and expanded, so that clearer themes could be identified.

#### Findings from focus groups

As can be imagined, a diversity of preferences and needs was also apparent in this stage of the project.

**Permeability**: Some respondent stated a preference for well-defined spaces that are set aside for writing and others found using more permeable spaces originally intended for other purposes, such as café edges or museums (or trains), more conducive for writing at certain points in the process. **Colour**: We had requests for bright coloured furniture and equally firm appeals for neutral décor. **Shared space**: Some preferred group tables, others specified that such group tables should have barriers defining individual workspaces, and other respondents said they would need individual pod-like structures for themselves alone. **Lighting** that can be altered according to personal preference or season was a popular request, as was the ability to **personalise** a space by spreading out one’s work or being able to lock personal belongings away to take a break mid-session.

We knew from the questionnaire that students often write in bed (staff do not), and the focus group participants expanded on this, discussing that this arises from a lack of private spaces to work in off campus.

The first, second and third stages of the project highlighted the diversity of Middlesex community writers and writer needs as well as the differences that arise according to text types and whether someone is writing individually or collaboratively. These stages of the project have also reinforced the strong sense of the centrality of writing in the production of thoughts and creative work at the University.

### Stage 4 Milan workshops

In the fourth stage of the project, The Milan Workshops, was an opportunity to test some of the findings and outcomes we got from previous phases. A group of 50 students (from the Design School of Milan Politecnico and Ohio State University), divided in groups of 4/5, worked on a brief developed out of the data generated from stages 2 and 3, to provide ideas and design solutions. This work was not intended to be a ‘result’ of how the space should be, but another step in the research that added content to be developed further.

#### The brief

The brief asked the students to generate design solutions for writing spaces with reference to some of the issues raised from the previous phases (*collaboration*, *identity* and *ownership*).

They were also asked to factor in specific features, including:

* the permeability of their writing space;
* context-specific affordances and constraints (public building, retail environment, library, bookshop, classroom, leftovers – such as corridors, footways, etc.);
* affordances and constraints of particular writing formats

These were the *ingredients* the students used to shape their projects.

#### Findings from the Milan workshops – design solutions

##### People like to work next to books

One of our findings is that at certain points in the writing process people like to work next to books (to be surrounded by knowledge perhaps) but also in a space with very few ingredients (books and shelves), where people’s behavior is usually reflective and encourages a focused state of mind.

Starting from this premise *Still Frame* (see fig 2.) was designed as a system that is generated and connected to bookshelves. The material the student designers chose was metallic, industrial shelving common in libraries and bookshops. They used these shelves to shape spaces that are literally extruded from the bookshelves.



Figure 2. 'Still Frame' a design proposal from the Milan workshop

This suggests that writing is part of a broad process that includes learning, reading and reflecting, and as such the design provides integrated spaces.

All the Milan projects were very much informed by a deep understanding of the role of the body in writing practice. In *Still Frame* this is acknowledged by the thin steel frames counterbalanced by coloured rubber-coated surfaces to sit on or write at in two different ‘settings’: one setting is more informal, for shorter writing tasks, and the other is more structured, for longer tasks.

##### Flexibility

Another key topic is flexibility: spaces need to be liquid, to be materially shaped according to different needs. At the University, different disciplines call for different forms of working, and that cross-fertilisation and contamination between them can produce unique spaces, but a risk is that flexibility can be translated into anonymity. Ownership of spaces, even if shared, is an idea that deals with the pleasure of being ‘somewhere’.

The *Origami* design proposal (see fig. 3) works using these themes, transforming existing university spaces (when necessary) into writing hubs. The structure unfolds and remodels ordinary classrooms into something special. The sequence of spaces generated, and the provision of different surfaces and tools, is able to provoke and enhance the exchange of ideas that then leads to writing.



Figure 3. 'Origami' a design proposal from the Milan workshop

*Mura della Creativita* (see fig 4.) provides a space within a space, exploring how space supports creativity and writing with a specific emphasis of the role of the bodies in the process. The space specifically supports collaborative writing, which as a very common practice both in academic and professional context needs specific features, such as more informal sitting and writing behaviors.



Figure 4. ‘Mura della Creativita’ a design proposal from the Milan workshop

##### Re-use of leftover spaces

The last proposal from the Milan workshop that we will mention here is *Slide & Study* (see fig. 5), which specifically addresses the re-use of leftover spaces. This project activates corridors in an educational context making a customizable temporary provision of desks and seats that the user can fold out from a wall mounting and arrange in different ways according to different needs or time frames (e.g. seated / standing; individual / group).



Figure 5. 'Slide and Study' a design proposal from the Milan workshop

Despite the recognition of the wonderful work our students did, these proposal are just a further step of the research, key moments for us to test and prototype the findings we had.

### Stage 5 Integrate our findings into university planning

The fifth stage of this project, still ongoing, is a moment of convergence again as we try to integrate our findings into university planning and encourage a conversation that include different stakeholders. Have presented on our project to the universities Learning landscapes group, and we are planning to conduct a series of workshop later in the academic year to develop realizable interventions on campus.

Also, the LET is about to move into a new office / teaching space, the design of which is informed by our project.

## Discussion

As can be imagined, we have a lot of data from this project. In this paper, we would like to highlight three interrelated and often overlapping themes: *ownership, embodiment* and *diverse spaces*. Each theme will be described then broken down into sub-themes.

### Theme 1 Ownership:

As we take this project forward, an important emerging theme is the ability to alter, personalize or have ownership of a space. This means that the space can be altered according to user preferences. In the focus groups, some respondents suggested that being a student means a having little to no personal space, and that having some degree of personalisable space at university would be welcome and could engender a sense of belonging. We wonder if it can also make the transition to university life less stressful- a university student experience aim.

#### **Alteration**

One spatial proposal might be lighting which can be altered according to the kind of work being done, the season or the time of day. Some respondents spoke of a wish to change the hue of the lighting. Others mentioned that being able to move a light to shine on their workspace is a simple but significant change a writer can make to their space, but it is currently not common on campus.

#### **Personalisation**

Pinboards were a popular request with respondents. They make invisible the development of a piece of work, as one participant stated, “You can see the thread of your thinking” (Focus Groups, undergraduate).

#### **Ownership**

There was a discussion about bookable spaces, as writers often need to take breaks (a healthy study practice) and when they do this need to leave their belongings in a safe, lockable place. However, students and staff expressed reservations about this, because of the likelihood that having booked a space some students might not turn up to use it, leaving it vacant but unavailable for others. We feel this practical issue, while relevant, should not get in the way of the provision of bookable space, but should be taken into account in the development of a workable booking procedure. This relates to the space issues at Middlesex.

### Theme 2 Embodiment and physicality

Embodiment & physicality refers to the importance of acknowledging the role that the body plays in the writing process, as Amis observes “Writing isn’t cerebral as people think, it’s physical too. It involves the whole body” (Amis cited in Clughen, 2014).

#### **Centrality of the body in writing**

Comfort was a topic raised by many respondents. Some commented on being stiff if they sit too long, others complained about the chairs at the universities, and some respondents talked about using exercise balls or stools at home, and one student respondent said “My bed is comfortable, which is why I like to research there”. This points to the need to recognize the role that the body plays in writing and the importance of having spaces that accommodate movement, and chairs that accommodate different body types.

#### **Location and movement**

Respondents reported changing locations for different tasks or at different times in the day, and at different points in the writing of a text. Several also spoke of the they use they make of walking during their writing process, to help develop ideas for their text. The relationship between walking and thinking is a well-documented (see Solnit 2002).

#### **Shaping and shaped**

How writing makes and shapes ideas was discussed in focus groups, particularly in relation to group work. Respondents called for space that is big enough to accommodate groups, and furniture and tools that encourage easy engagement with shared text production. The idea that standing is good for group work was reflected in calls for tables and surfaces that are high enough to write on while standing up around them, and walls that can be written on, either directly or with rolls of pull-down paper.

### Theme 3 Diverse space(s):

Responses from our participants made it apparent that we need to make an important shift of focus, from designing a single writing space towards multiple spaces. Indeed, while the project began with the development of a specific space in mind, it has become clear that this would be an insufficient response, and that the development of the whole campus into an effective writing environment should be considered.

Suggestions about how this might be achieved include the development of several and varied writing-specific spaces across the campus, the designs of which take account of the themes mentioned above. To do this requires a mapping of available space on campus including: spaces already set aside for writing, like the Library and parts of public areas; spaces already used unofficially for writing, like empty / unused teaching spaces; and spaces currently not usable, or left-over spaces like corners and corridors. These correspond, to an extent, with Neary et al.’s spatial categories mentioned earlier. This mapping will be a complex activity, needing to take account of many overlapping and contradictory factors, so we plan to do it (in 2018) involving members of the University writing community, as an extension of this project.

Out of the mapping activity we expect to be able to clearly sign-post writing spaces on campus, and identify “Writing-routes” through the campus and its surrounding area, which will include routes which writers might walk, between sessions of writing, to stimulate and enliven thoughts (Rousseau, cited in Solnit 2002: 19) and develop their texts.

In these ways we hope to go some way towards activating the whole campus as a writing space. To do so the diversity of the writing community will need to be acknowledged so it plays a central role in the design process. The project has so far made us aware of many points of differentiation between our community’s members, including the following:

#### **Diverse** **stakeholders**

* Students and staff
* Groups and individuals
* Foundation-level to PhD-level writers

#### **Diverse levels of experience and confidence**

* Some might need easy access to a mentor or adviser
* Some might be put off by the presence of others

#### **Diverse** **textual practices** **& preferences**

* Mono- and multi-modal ways of writing
* Range of uses for writing (e.g. reflective, generative, etc.)
* Range of genres (e.g. essay, report, etc.)
* Levels of comfort required (e.g. bed, exercise ball, standing table, etc.)
* Levels of noise required / tolerated (e.g. silence of the Library, buzz of the café, etc.)

#### **Diverse disciplines & their relationships with them**

* Textual expectations of the disciplines
* The writer’s position in relation to the expectations (to meet or challenge them)

#### **Stages in the writing process**

* Early stages might need close access to books and reference materials (Library)
* Later stages might need access to drafting facilities (computer and printer) for writing and reading

This is a partial list. It only covers points of differentiation that emerged during our project. We expect that a different set of participants would evidence diversity in different ways. What it gives us, however, is an awareness of the need to avoid generalised assumptions about the writing community at the University, and a sense of the value of including these members in the development of new spaces for writing. Each of these points of differentiation carries with it associated needs, which will be considered in the mapping workshop.

## Conclusions

An overarching conclusion we draw from our research so far is that designing writing space for Middlesex is a process of managing often conflicting needs, practices and preferences of a community made up of writers with widely varying relationships with writing. Designing space(s) for writing should take into the account the need that writers have to alter, personalise and secure the space they write in, however temporarily. It should also address the embodied nature of writing; something our respondents commented on often, but that is overlooked in much educational spatial design. Another conclusion relates to the multiplicity of sites for writing, as it takes place everywhere. So designing space(s) for writing is a matter of activating an entire campus, not a particular room. It is clear that this will be an ongoing project, one that is revisited regularly, because of the dynamic, changeable nature of the people who write, and of what writing as a practice involves.

## Bibliography

Blackman, T. (2017) The Comprehensive University: An alternative to social stratification by academic selection. HEPI. Available at: http://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Hepi-The-Comprehensive-University\_Occasional-Paper-17-11\_07\_17-1.pdf (Accessed 13 October 2017).

Bouquet, E.H. (2002). *Noise from the Writing Center*. Logan: Utah State University Press.

Carruthers, P. (1998) *Language, thought and consciousness: An essay in philosophical psychology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Clughen, L. (2014). ‘embodied writing support’: The importance of the body in engaging students with writing. *Journal of Writing in Creative Practice*, *7*(2): 283-300.

Higgins, S., Hall, E., Wall, K., Woolner, P. and McCaugghey, C. (2005) *The Impact of School Environments: A Literature Review*. London: Design Council.

Donahue, C. (2009) ‘“Internationalization” and Composition Studies: Reorienting the Discourse'. *College Composition and Communication.* 61(2): 212-243.

Ganobcsik-Williams, L. (2012) ‘Reflecting on What Can be Gained by Comparing Models of Academic Writing Provision’. in *Writing Programs Worldwide: Profiles of Academic Writing in Many Places*. ed. by Thaiss, C., Bräuer, G., Carlino, P., Ganobcsik-Williams, L. and Sinha, A. Fort Collins, Colorado: The WAC Clearinghouse: 499-511.

Grutsch-McKinney, J. (2013). *Peripheral Visions for Writing Centers.* Colorado: University Press of Colorado.

Harbord, J. (2010). 'Writing in Central and Eastern Europe: Stakeholders and Directions in Initiating Change’. *Across the Disciplines.* 7, 207-226.

IDEO (2009), *The Field Guide to Humancentred design*. Available at: http://www.designkit.org//resources/1 (Accessed 15 June 2017)

Koshy, V. (2005) *Action research for improving practice: A practical guide*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Lea, M. and Street, B. (1998) Student Writing in Higher Education: An Academic Literacies Approach. *Studies in Higher Education.* 23, 2. June: 157-183.

Lillis, T. (2003) Student Writing as 'Academic Literacies': Drawing on Bakhtin to Move from Critique to Design. *Language and Education,* 17, 3: 192-207.

Lea, M.R. & Street, B.V. (2006) The "Academic Literacies" Model: Theory and Applications. *Theory Into Practice.* 45, 4: 368-377.

Lea, M.R. (2004) Academic literacies: a pedagogy for course design. *Studies in Higher Education.* 29, 6: 739-756.

McNiff, J. (2013) *Action Research Principles and Practice*. New York: Routledge.

Middlesex University (no date) ‘Middlesex University Strategic Plan’ http://www.mdx.ac.uk/\_\_data/assets/pdf\_file/0025/49642/MDXStrategicPlan\_2012-2017\_updated\_V3.pdf (Accessed 13 October 2017).

Neary, M., Harrison, A., Crellin, J., Parekh, N., Saunders, G., Duggan, F., Williams, S. and Austin, S. (2010) *Learning Landscapes in Higher Education*. Available at: http://learninglandscapes.blogs.lincoln.ac.uk/files/2010/04/FinalReport.pdf (Accessed 30th Dec. 2017)

Petit, A. (1997). The writing center as "purified space": Competing discourses and the dangers of definition. *The Writing Center Journal*. 17(2), 111-122.

Read, B., Archer, L. and Leathwood, C. (2003) Challenging Cultures? Student Conceptions of ‘Belonging’ and ‘Isolation at a Post-1992 University’ *Studies in Higher Education.* 28(3), pp. 261-277.

Riggall, A. (2009). Action research: What is it, who does it and why? *Practical research for education*. 1, VI.

Solnit, R. (2002) *Wanderlust: A history of walking.* London: Verso.

UCISA (2016) *The UK Higher Education Learning Space Toolkit: a SCHOMS, AUDE and UCISA collaboration.* Available at: https://www.ucisa.ac.uk/learningspace (Accessed 30th Dec. 2017)

Vertovec, S. (2007) Superdiversity and its implications. *Ethnic and Racial Studies.* 30(6): 1024-1054.

Whitehead, J. and Mcniff, J. (2006) *Action Research Living Theory*. London: SAGE Publications.

# Glossary & Digest of theorists / frames

*Academic Literacies* is an approach to the development of writing in academic contexts that foregrounds the siuatedness of literacy, and that sees writing as a social practice. As such it calls for agile and highly context-sensitive understandings of the role that writing plays in a given setting, and of the conventions that define the practices of that setting. While, for writing instructors, this suggests close and collaborative working relationships with disciplinary specialists, Ac Lits also proposes that we adopt critical positions in relation to these settings, and that we question our disciplinary-specialist colleagues; assuming a kind of insider-outsider role. It emphasises the transformative part that writing plays in knowledge generation, and it strongly resists the deficit model view of student writing. The project outlined here is an initiative underpinned by these principles, and it is a collaboration intended to encourage changes to our institutional context that acknowledge (and celebrate) the centrality of writing to it.

See: Lillis, T., Harrington, K., Lea, M.R. & Mitchell, S. (2015) *Working With Academic Literacies: Case Studies Towards Transformative Practice.* Anderson, SC: Parlour Press.

Lea, M. and Street, B. (1998) Student Writing in Higher Education: An Academic Literacies Approach. *Studies in Higher Education.* 23 (2) June: 157-183.

Lillis, T. (2003) Student Writing as 'Academic Literacies': Drawing on Bakhtin to Move from Critique to Design. *Language and Education,* 17 (3): 192-207.

Lea, M.R. & Street, B.V. (2006) The "Academic Literacies" Model: Theory and Applications. *Theory Into Practice.* 45 (4): 368-377.

*Human-centred design* is one of three movements popular among designers today, along with *technology-driven design* and *environmentally sustainable design* (Giacomin 2015: 607). Each of these is underpinned by distinct ‘discourses and values’ (ibid.), and leads to distinct kinds of design outputs. Human-centred design is characterised as being mutli-disciplinary, iterative, empirical and pragmatic. It is a highly situated practice, which takes into account a stakeholder’s context and how she interacts with it. Outputs are not based on ‘fixed preconceived cognitive plans and schema’ (ibid.: 608), rather on a repeated process of questioning, responding, proposing and evaluating that involves stakeholders.

See: Giacomin, J. (2014) What Is Human Centred Design? *The Design Journal*, 17 (4): 606-623.

IDEO (2009), *The Field Guide to Humancentred design*. Available at: http://www.designkit.org//resources/1 (Accessed 15 June 2017)

*Widening Participation* (WP) is a UK government initiative to encourage young people into HE from backgrounds that typically do not go to university. In 1999 Tony Blair proposed that by 2010, 50% of the UK population under-30 should take part in HE (see BBC 1999). Although this has not happened, at least to this scale, WP has had significant impact on UK HE, and in particular at institutions like Middlesex University, which recruits from local communities typically underrepresented in HE (see Blackman 2017). Such recruitment has resulted in increases in levels of participation of young people with diverse relationships with education and English, many of whom are mature, have specific learning difficulties like dyslexia, and / or attend on a part-time basis. Such a cohort requires a robust and responsive university infrastructure that encourages meaningful educational development of these students, and prevents them from dropping-out. The study outlined here grew within, and as part of such an infrastructure. The new Vice-Chancellor at Middlesex recently published a paper proposing a non-selective, comprehensive university system (ibid.). This indicates that the social inclusion and social justice that underpins WP are still crucial factors for our institution, but in a climate of 'austerity measures' and a highly marketised HE sector, it is under considerable pressure.

See: BBC (1999) Blair wants student boom. *BBC News*. Available at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/292504.stm (Accessed 8th February 2018)

Blackman, T. (2017) The Comprehensive University: An alternative to social stratification by academic selection. HEPI. Available at: http://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Hepi-The-Comprehensive-University\_Occasional-Paper-17-11\_07\_17-1.pdf (Accessed 13 October 2017)

Dillon, J. (2007) Reflections on widening participation policy: macro influences and micro implications. *Widening participation and lifelong learning: The Journal of the Institute for Access Studies and the European Access Network*. 9 (2): 16-25.

1. For several years, the team has worked in offices not directly accessible to students, so face-to-face contact with students, in pre-arranged one-to-one tutorials or group workshops, has had to be made in spaces booked via a central room-bookings system. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Middlesex University is a post-1992 university (a former polytechnic), located in London. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. ‘Francesca Murialdo and Peter Thomas, in partnership with Naomi House, are collaborating on a module for Interior Architecture students entitled, “Writing as Design Practice”. Peter Thomas and Ruth Bonazza both work to support students at the University with writing and language and Ruth Bonazza facilitates a daily open “Writing Space”, or a space to which students come to write. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Most respondents came from business, law and science and technology programmes, but few from the Arts and creative industries or health and education. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)