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Published version deposited in CURVE March 2011

Original citation & hyperlink:

Ganobcsik-Williams, L. (2010) Academic writing in higher education: a brief overview.

Research Intelligence, volume 113 : 10-11.

<http://www.bera.ac.uk/publications/ri/>

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disciplines of writing

Academic Writing in Higher Education: A Brief Overview



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Many educational stakeholders now recognise the importance of 'writing development' in higher education. In countries around the world, students, academics, university managers, graduate employers and funding bodies increasingly acknowledge that scholarly writing and the supporting of writing development are complex activities worthy of sustained attention.

This article offers a brief overview of the field of Academic Writing practice and theory in the UK context, and discusses key areas on which the movement to teach and research Academic Writing in UK universities has focused.

Academic Writing emerged as a field for teaching and research in the UK higher education sector in the early 1990s (Ganobcsik-Williams, 2006: xxi-xxvi). Factors that characterised higher education's move toward becoming a mass system, such as an unprecedented growth in student numbers and a diversity of students' cultural and educational backgrounds, began to lead scholars and practitioners from a variety of disciplines, including Education, Linguistics, English and Anthropology, as well as staff developers and student support staff, to focus on student writing at university level. This work on mainstream student writing was informed by, but distinct from, the study of writing of non-native speakers of English.

Supporting students' writing

In 1998, Mary Lea and Brian Street articulated a critical framework that pushed forward scholarly debate on approaches to working with HE student writing and student writers. They described two dominant approaches to improving student writing: skills teaching and academic socialisation. Lea and Street argued for the inadequacy of both, saying that the skills approach is too reductive and that relying on academic socialisation or acculturation, which sees writing proficiency as something students absorb through exposure to disciplinary modes of knowledge, is unrealistic in a modularised higher education system. Lea and Street posited an 'Academic Literacies' approach that moves beyond other models by challenging the assumption that students must simply learn the conventions of writing at university, and suggests that institutional practices of writing also must change in a new mass higher education context of inclusion and diversity. Lea and Street's Academic Literacies framework laid a basis for theorising student writing development that many writing teachers and scholars in the UK and elsewhere continue to explore.

Other influential researchers on student writing from this period and more recently include Theresa Lillis, whose book *Student Writing: Access, Regulation, Desire* (2001) argues for the importance of student-teacher dialogue about students' writing and 'meaning making' through writing, and Roz Ivaniã, whose book *Writing and Identity: The Discoursal Construction of Identity in Academic Writing* (1998) 'gave a new political urgency and intellectual stringency to the theoretical underpinning of work on Academic Writing' (Tomic, in Ganobcsik-Williams, 2006: 63). Sally Mitchell's work on teaching argument (e.g. Mitchell and Andrews 2000); Mary Lea and Barry Stierer's *Student Writing in Higher Education: New Contexts* (2000), and Carys Jones, Joan Turner and Brian Street's *Students Writing in the University: Cultural and Epistemological Issues* (1999) are also important contributions. One of many textbooks for student writers, now in its third edition, is Phyllis Crème and Mary Lea's *Writing at University: A Guide for Students* (2008). An example of scholarship addressing the issue of writing standards is Lisa Ganobcsik-Williams' *A Report on the Teaching of Writing in UK Higher Education* (2004), which argues for a developmental approach to teaching writing to all students rather than a focus on a crisis in writing standards.

The founding of Academic Writing discussion and research networks has both accompanied and enabled scholarship and practice. In the UK, two active groups are the Inter-university Academic Literacies Research Group (Aclits) and the Writing Development in Higher Education (WDHE) network. There are also three main European professional organisations that focus on Academic Writing at the tertiary level: the European Association for the Teaching of Academic Writing (EATAW); the European Writing Centers Association (EWCA), which is a regional affiliate of the International Writing Centers Association (IWCA); and SIG Writing, a Special Interest Group of the European Association for Research in Learning and Instruction (EARLI), which publishes a 'Studies in Writing' book series as well as the *Journal of Writing Research*, and whose focus includes, but is not limited to, research on university student writing.

The growth of writing initiatives and writing centres in UK universities has also been a major, underpinning development for

Academic Writing theory and practice. There are a variety of schemes, initiatives and approaches that have been established, ranging from dedicated writing centres at Coventry University, London Metropolitan University, St. Mary's University College Belfast, the University of Limerick and the University of Gloucestershire; to a well-embedded 'Writing in the Disciplines' programme at Queen Mary, University of London; to a devolved model of Academic Skills Tutors at the University of Huddersfield; to 'Writing by Appointment' and associated student writing support programmes at the University of Dundee. In these varied and locally-contextualised ways, a sense of possibility for writing development is being realised.

Some of these models for writing development have been influenced by writing theories and pedagogies that have been imported, at least in part, from the United States, Europe, Australia and other countries. The writing centre, or 'center', for example, is a model for providing individualised writing support to students that has been part of US higher education since the 1930s and established in most US universities and colleges since the 1970s. Most UK-based writing centres concentrate, as in the US, on offering students one-to-one tutorials on the writing they do for their university courses, but some (again as in the US) also engage in staff development in the teaching of writing in order to enable academics to cascade the explicit teaching of writing within their university departments. This staff development can take the form of both 'Writing Across the Curriculum' (WAC) and 'Writing in the Disciplines' (WiD). WAC theory and its 'Writing to Learn' (WTL) pedagogies encourage the use of writing to engage students in the processes of learning. WiD, in some ways a specialised subcomponent of WAC, 'refers to both a research movement to understand what writing actually occurs in the different disciplinary areas and a curricular reform movement to offer disciplinary-related writing instruction' (Bazerman et al. 2005: 9-10). The 'Thinking Writing' programme at Queen Mary, University of London, exemplifies a WiD approach that has developed in the UK context. Mary Deane and Peter O'Neill's book *Writing in the Disciplines* (forthcoming 2010) examines further the emergence of WiD in UK universities.

Supporting staff in writing for publication

Another focus for writing developers is on supporting staff in writing for publication. Rowena Murray at the University of Strathclyde has led the field in identifying the benefits for staff in all university departments to engage in writing retreats and to learn strategies for writing and publishing. Murray's *Writing for Academic Journals* (2009), now in its second edition, is a practical handbook for postgraduate students and academics who are looking to write for publication as well as for writing specialists who are seeking to provide guidance in publication writing. Since 2006, the Centre for Academic Writing at Coventry University has also been developing innovative practice in running scholarly writing retreats, 'protected writing time' for staff, and staff writing consultations, and demand for these types of writing provision has increased internally and externally. An equally important issue for staff development in writing for publication is the pressure on academics around the world to publish in English. Based on an eight-year text-ethnographic study of fifty scholars, Theresa Lillis and Mary Jane Curry's *Academic Writing in a Global Context: The Politics and Practices of Publishing in English* (2010) examines this phenomenon in detail.

Academic writing and new technologies

In addition to stand-alone models of online writing support such as the 'Grammar Beagle', 'Referencing Ferret' and 'Plagiarism Badger' developed at Nottingham Trent University (http://www.ntu.ac.uk/elearning/projects/case_studies/qmp/index.html), Academic Writing teachers and scholars are exploring the potential of hypertext writing assignments (McKenna, 2004) and online writing environments. The AWESOME Dissertation Environment at the University of Leeds, for example, employs Web 2.0 technologies to support undergraduate dissertation-writing through a social network space (<http://awesome.leeds.ac.uk/>), while the online social software tools PBWiki and Ning are used by Writing Skills Advisors at the University of Huddersfield to support writing practice in collaborative learning communities. Online writing tutorials are now offered by the Writing Centre at London Metropolitan University (<http://www.londonmet.ac.uk/depts/fls/write-now/online-tutorials.cfm>) and through the Coventry Online Writing Lab (COWL) at Coventry University (<http://cuba.coventry.ac.uk/cowl/>), and have important implications in terms of the changing nature of writing tutorial pedagogies and for the teaching and researching of writing overall.

Academic Writing Networks

European Association for the Teaching of Academic Writing (EATAW) <http://www.eataw.eu/>

European Writing Centers Association (EWCA) <http://ewca.sabanciuniv.edu/eng/>

European Association for Research in Learning and Instruction (EARLI), SIG Writing <http://www.sig-writing.org/>

International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) <http://writingcenters.org/>

Inter-university Academic Literacies Research Group (Aclits) <http://www.ioe.ac.uk/study/departments/lcll/15912.html>

Writing Development in Higher Education (WDHE) initiative <http://www.writenow.ac.uk/news-events/wdhe-conference-2010/about-wdhe/>

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