

Academic Writing: Anxiety, Confusion and the Affective Domain: Why Should Subject Lecturers Acknowledge the Social and Emotional Aspects of Writing Development Processes?

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Abstract

After working in Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE) in the United Kingdom for over thirty years, and completing a doctoral thesis on the subject of lecturers' perceptions of academic writing in HE (French 2014), it became very clear to me that many students and lecturers (although that is a subject of another paper) experience the processes of producing academic writing in very physical and emotional ways. In this paper, I will be discussing how my students often articulated the intensity and emotional nature of their academic writing experiences using words like 'fear', 'frustration', 'outrage', 'exhaustion' and 'yearning'. This emotion and strength of feeling drew me to consider the relationship between the development of a positive writing identity and the affective domain. Subsequently, in my practice as a tutor in HE, I incorporated the affective domain into my work and seek here to stimulate debate with subject lecturers about how important emotions, even negative emotions like confusion and anxiety, can be to the development of a positive academic writing identity for students. The paper argues that, by using the affective domain as a pedagogic springboard, subject lecturers can formulate more collaborative, supportive and emotionally sensitive communities of writing practice.

Why Are Students So Anxious About Academic Writing?

I have worked in the UK in Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE) for over thirty years, and wrote my doctoral thesis on the subject of lecturers' perceptions of academic writing in HE (French 2014). Over this time, it became very clear to me that many students, and lecturers (although that is a subject of another paper), experience the processes of producing academic writing in very physical and emotional ways. This is because HE is a domain saturated in very particular "high-stakes" academic writing practices for students. Like Bennett (2010), in her book *Vibrant Matter*, I want to use this paper to talk about how objects, such as academic writing texts, which are both produced and consumed in the Academy, have the capacity to "animate," that is, affect, those who come into contact with them. In short, I will be exploring how academic writing processes and products form part of the web of social and pedagogic interactions through which students (and lecturers) create their academic identities.

This paper draws on my doctoral thesis, which was submitted in 2014. The primary study was a small qualitative survey carried out with self-selecting teaching staff (32) in one Education Faculty in a post-1992 university, who responded to an open online elicitation to discuss their academic writing experiences since being undergraduates. Although in my thesis I did not set out to explore how or why academic writing creates anxiety, many of the respondents talked frequently and passionately about how academic writing was a necessary ever present "thing"

in their and their students' lives which they often got very emotional about (Bennett 2010). This paper, acting on insights gained through examination of the thesis data, seeks to encourage subject lecturers to acknowledge and work effectively with the social and emotional aspects of academic writing development processes.

Academic writing practices and conventions have long been acknowledged as one of the principle means by which the Academy produces, defines and polices itself as a distinct and privileged social institution (French 2014, 2017, Lea and Street 1998, Lillis 2001, Lillis and Turner 2001). Students' academic writing, therefore, constitutes the primary means by which they, across all disciplines, present their learning and understanding in HE, and how they are most often assessed on their learning and understanding by the subject lecturers who mark their written work. The personal stakes around producing "good" academic writing in HE are, therefore, high for all students who have a lot invested in doing well at university.

The approach to academic writing development, explored in this paper, focuses on the affective domain. This was first identified in Bloom's Taxonomy and then further revised in the work of Krathwohl, Bloom and Masia (1964) as the domain of feelings, emotions and attitudes that affects learning processes. It suggests that subject lecturers, not just specialist writing developers, could usefully explore how students feel about academic writing. In doing so, it draws on the work of Clughen (2014) who writes of how authors, more commonly than academic writers, have written about the intense physicality and emotionalism of writing as a process or form of labour. Within disciplinary-based learning in HE, thinking about the role emotion plays in the production of academic writing can, this paper maintains, reposition subject-specific academic writing development more holistically. It does this by insisting on an, albeit complex, relationship between learning and forms of academic writing and students' established emotional and intellectual resources. Ingold asserts that:

there is no division, in practice, between work and life [...] a practice [like academic writing] involves the whole person, continually drawing on past experience as it is projected into the future (cited in Brinkmann 2012: 240).

In this vein, I also believe that students should be encouraged by their subject lecturers to think of writing in HE as an integral part of their wider academic identity, which draws on their personal, whole-life experiences of learning.

Students' subjective experiences and feelings about academic writing practices, including those they experienced before they got to university, should therefore be taken very seriously. As this paper argues, all experiences of writing in education form part of a distinctively emotional, more often than not socially constructed, understanding of academic writing as an inherently communal, specifically disciplinary, practice. This emphasis on the emotional aspects of academic writing in HE is an extension of the New Literacy Studies (NLS) situated approach. In NLS, theorists like Barton and Hamilton (1998), Gee (1996) and Street (1984, 1995) contend that it is unhelpful, and potentially damaging, to treat literacy as the product of a unitary, autonomous skill-set that can be taught or learned independently of its context of use. Rather, Street's emerging 'ideological' model of literacy:

offers a more culturally sensitive view of literacy practices as they vary from one context to another. This [ideological] model starts from different premises than the autonomous model – it posits instead that literacy is a social practice, not simply a technical and neutral skill [...] It is about knowledge: the ways in which people address reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity, being (1984: 7-8).

In addition, the NLS theorists also insist that specific literacy practices, like writing in HE, are inherently tied up with personal relationships, identities and feelings. They also explore how the various educational settings, in which learners operate – such as universities, are characterised by clearly differentiated sets of literacy practices, texts and events (Gee 2014, Street 1999).

By acknowledging that these clearly differentiated sets of literacy practices, texts and events are experienced by students through emotionally charged processes, it may be possible to

create a new appreciation of the complexities of students' emotional entanglements with those practices. However, my research suggests that students' emotional responses to academic writing are often unappreciated by their subject lecturers. Indeed, most of my lecturer respondents reported that they had their awareness of students' anxiety and confusion around academic writing blunted by a largely institutional pressure to focus on academic writing as the vehicle through which students' learning is demonstrated via summative assignments (Clughen and Hardy 2012, Ivanič 1998, Ivanič, Clark and Rimmershaw 2000). The effects of subject lecturers' lack of emotional engagement with students' feelings about their academic writing can perhaps be seen most clearly when one explores the issue of negative feedback on assignments that characterise academic writing in very general terms as "poor", "undeveloped", or "weak". When they receive this kind of vague, negative feedback many students are left feeling confused, anxious and disenfranchised from the whole process of academic writing (Northedge 2006, Price, O'Donovan and Rust 2007). Conversely, this paper maintains that writing development processes should be presented to students as an iterative practice that, more often than not, requires sustained trial and error, struggle and even failure, in order to improve (French 2017). Consequently, there is a continuing need to foreground and acknowledge the ways in which emotions, such as anxiety and confusion, come to define the act of academic writing development and production for many students.

What Does "Good Writing" Look Like in HE?

Universities have not traditionally embraced academic writing as a form of situated social practice that can play out differently for students with different writing histories and experiences. Rather, a powerful utilitarian, skills-based, model of "good writing" predominates in HE (Lea and Street 1998, Lillis and Turner 2001). Termed the 'autonomous' model of writing by Street in 1994, it presupposes that "good" writing, once grasped, has universal applications, which are devoid of any ideological or cultural values. In the context of HE, the autonomous model often manifests itself, simplistically and inaccurately, through the assumption by subject lecturers that they can clearly identify and articulate what "good academic writing" is for their subject. However, an inability to appreciate the complexity of academic writing development has repeatedly resulted in very negative consequences for students struggling to understand what is required of them as writers in HE (French 2014, 2017, Lillis and Turner 2001, Turner and Scott 2008). The ubiquity of autonomous approaches to academic writing development in HE, moreover, means that these approaches constitute a "given", in the sense of something taken for granted. This means that the attitudes to, and expectations around, academic writing development often remain vague at best and invisible at worst, whilst simultaneously being invoked by lecturers (*you need to improve your writing style or find your academic voice*) as an obvious way of improving performance (Lea and Street 1998, Lillis 2001).

This approach has created entrenched polarising discourses which generate a crude binary for many subject lecturers between students who "can" and students who "cannot" write to an "appropriate disciplinary standard" (Williams 1997). This view persists even though students, more often than not, are taught their subject without any recognition that there are specific disciplinary writing assumptions and expectations that underpin the presentation of learning in that subject. Academic Literacies research has critiqued "autonomous" skills-based models of academic writing, showing how many (though by no means all) subject lecturers are unable or unwilling to address literacy in their teaching. This illustrates how the dominance of the autonomous model of academic writing development has created a situation where it is accepted that subject-specific lecturers in HE are not traditionally expected to spend time articulating and demonstrating the writing practices specific to their discipline, nor are they usually offered any training or encouragement to do so (French 2017, Wingate 2015). This is despite evidence to suggest that academic writing is habitually identified by lecturers and students as the weakest study skill, especially for new undergraduates (Davies, Swinburne and Williams 2006, Durkin and Main 2002).

This paper argues that a more holistic approach to academic writing development is needed which recognises the role emotion can and does play in a writing environment like HE, not least because written summative assignments are so ubiquitous. In reality, there is a common failure

by subject lecturers to acknowledge the connection between emotion and the experience of producing academic writing. This often leads, unnecessarily, to students' heightened anxiety about their inability to write in the "right" way, especially when they receive negative feedback focusing on their writing.

However, frequently students report that they do not understand what their lecturers' comments mean or how they could be used to improve their writing in any practical sense (Lillis and Turner 2001, Price et al. 2007). In this way, the largely uncritical acceptance of dominant, yet tacit institutional, utilitarian, autonomous approaches to academic writing and writing development writing practices in HE, creates a particular kind of 'institutional habitus' (Reay 2004, Reay et al. 2001) an idea which reflects:

the impact of a cultural group or social class on an individual's behaviour as it is mediated through an organisation (Reay et al. 2001: 2).

This paper offers an adaptation of the "institutional habitus" concept through its exploration of the impact of HE's ingrained institutional bias towards autonomous approaches to academic writing. In this way, I argue, it legitimises their dominance, and has a number of unfortunate implications. It fails to acknowledge how unfamiliar and remote dominant academic writing practices are for many students, especially those from widening participation (WP) backgrounds who are drawn from social groups historically unrepresented at British universities (Ivanič, Clark and Rimmershaw 2000, Lillis and Turner 2001, McGivney 2003).

As I explored in my thesis, many subject lecturers' assumptions about what constitutes "good academic writing" in HE have their origins in a time now long-gone. Prior to the current thirty years of growth in the sector, undergraduates were part of a more homogeneous, socially elite group, who entered university via the successful completion of common educational qualifications. These, in the Humanities at least, relied on long-established discursive "essayist" forms of academic writing (French 2017, Lillis 2001). However, this shared writing history no longer exists, as many undergraduates in the UK have previously completed professional or vocational qualifications that rely on very different evidence-gathering, portfolio-based literacies. Many mature students, who make up significant numbers in some UK universities, have either never acquired any formal educational qualifications or have been out of education for a long time (Davies, Swinburne and Williams 2006). In addition to which, there is the increasing propensity of university courses to require students to be familiar with other academic writing practices such as reflective writing and a host of digital literacies such as blogs and forums which need to be repurposed from social to academic purposes (Lea and Jones 2011).

Significantly, in HE, the question of what actually constitutes "good writing" only becomes a visible pedagogic issue for students who are deemed to not be able to "write well". However, deficit or remedial models of academic writing, such as referral to cross-university writing/study skills centres by subject-specific tutors for support, remain the most common response offered to students who are struggling with academic writing (Starfield 2007). Even when students self-refer to such centres, their struggles with academic writing can feel like a very personal failure. Consequently, they can become very demoralised, often feeling ashamed that they and their writing have been singled out for "support" (French 2017). This is a perception that HE settings often do very little to dispel.

For this reason, Smit (2012) suggests that the deficit model of academic writing support in HE is least likely to be taken up by those who need it the most. Moreover, a real weakness of the cross-university support model, with regard to the creation of a more emotionally engaged approach to academic writing development, is the extent to which it decontextualises academic writing development. This is because support is usually offered by generic writing-developers. They inevitably cannot share the disciplinary background (and concomitant subject-specific writing practices) of every student they work with, nor do they have any input into the written summative assessments that their "clients" are having to produce. This leaves writing developers, like the students that they are trying to help, often having to guess, not only what the subject-specific lecturer setting the assessment actually wants the students to write about,

but how exactly they want them to write about it (and why). However, students' academic writing identities in HE are largely produced through successful participation in subject-specific academic writing and writing development practices, such as reading the field, creating presentations and writing summative assignments such as essays, reflective journals and reports.

It is important, therefore, that academic writing development practices challenge the primacy of autonomous approaches to writing and the dominance of the deficit discourses informing writing development in HE, which they support. This paper calls for more emotionally sensitive approaches to academic writing development that can offer opportunities for students to enact critical forms of academic identity-work, through ongoing writing development activities situated within subject-specific teaching. Specifically, this more emotionally centred approach could normalise the experience many nascent academic writers in HE experience; namely of working through a series of distinct, often conflicting/conflicted writing identities, which, to varying degrees emerge and merge, only to fade and/or consolidate as students progress through their programme of study.

Ivanič's (2004) work reflects the extent to which the affective domain is central to the development of a positive academic writing identity. Ivanič is clear about the emotional attachment students have to their writing and how it is deep-seated and fundamental to their perception of themselves as students. Butler, in her work, explores how 'identity is a signifying practice' (1990: 145), by which she means that individuals perform or act in various ways to signal to others aspects of their identity. This paper proposes that students perform aspects of their identity as students through the "signifying practice" of academic writing. Combining both ideas, I argue that academic writing in HE creates, as much as any increase in an individual's subject knowledge, crucial opportunities for academic 'identity negotiation and identity investment' (Butler 1990: 264) as students invariably wish to be seen, and who want to feel themselves to be, successful academic writers.

In this way, explicitly iterative and emotionally engaged approaches to academic writing development could help undermine the simplistic binary division between "good" and "bad" academic writing identities. This is because they encourage a more complex, fluid conceptualisation of academic writing development that accepts that improvements can often only be wrung out of struggle and even failure. These purportedly negative experiences can therefore be both generative and positive in their effects, whilst simultaneously being experienced as painful (French 2017). Thus, anxiety about academic writing, whilst never completely avoidable, or surprising given its high-stakes, can be repositioned as necessary and anticipated, irrespective of how "successful", or not, any individual student may be at any given time in their academic careers.

The rest of the paper focuses now on how, in practical terms, a more community-based emotionally-connected approach to academic writing might begin to be enacted in everyday practice by subject lecturers who are not trained writing developers.

Creating Positive and Emotionally Sensitive Writing Communities of Practice in HE

This paper has maintained that academic writing is an inherently stressful and often difficult process, which is often very emotional in nature. I now wish to link this idea to Lave and Wenger's concept of 'communities of practice' which introduced the idea that learning emerges through active 'legitimate peripheral participation' by individuals in a 'community of practice' located in a specific domain (1991). In the communities of practice model, learning is most effectively facilitated when an individual is emotionally engaged in the social practices of a wider community to which they feel they belong. This is because 'learning is an integral and inseparable aspect of social practice' (Lave and Wenger 1991: 31). Being engaged in communities of writing practice therefore:

refers not just to local events of engagement in certain activities with certain people, but to a more encompassing process of being active participants in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities (Wenger 1998: 4).

Reflecting this idea, Candlin suggests that academic writing and writing development practices should be seen as:

a “vehicle” by which to lead “apprentices” through a process of continual improvement into membership of the disciplinary academy (1998: 7).

Positive and emotionally sensitive approaches to academic writing development obviously challenge the ways in which HE traditionally valorises individualised trajectories of academic success, achievement and progression. However, they do not value the experience (and pain) of trial and error as part of the development of academic writers (Alexander 2010, Simon 1999). The approach outlined in this paper argues that producing “good” academic writing is not only about individual effort and ability, rather it is intimately connected to how an individual feels about themselves as a student and, of course, inevitably as an academic writer. Clegg (2008) explores how undergraduates are part of wider social and cultural communities of practice in university as they are simultaneously members of a disciplinary field, a university, a faculty and a course.

Thinking about learning through social pedagogies and communities of learning encourages an altogether more collective ‘pedagogy of mutuality’ (Bruner 1996: 56) that is about belonging and understanding how to “be” in the community one is part of. Specifically, this idea of mutuality, is characterised as an emotional connection, to one’s lecturers, fellow students and the wider disciplinary field (as in, *I love history*) and the forms of academic writing they necessitate. Drawing on the ideas of Dewey (1933) and Vygotsky (1962) education learning can be seen as mediated through an overtly dialectic process between individuals and the various learning communities of which they are a part. This social aspect explicitly recognises that learning is an emotional, as well as a cerebral, activity.

Each programme of study, especially if it is in a new subject or at a different level, involves joining a new community requiring different kinds of academic writing practices. This is because learning about a subject and developing ideas and articulating them through one’s academic writing are two sides of the same coin, each as important as the other. Not surprisingly, adapting to change and new expectations about different kinds of academic writing often creates anxiety for students. This is notably the case when disciplinary assumptions about writing are “given”, rather than discussed and interrogated (French 2017). As Northedge (2006) and Haggis (2008) point out, if students experience negative feedback about their writing, especially when they have just embarked on a new course, they can become fearful of producing the “wrong” kind of writing. Yet they are unlikely to seek help and often struggle alone, fruitlessly, to unlock the secret of the “right” kind of writing that will earn them good grades.

One way to counteract this isolation is for lecturers to build emotionally sensitive writing communities of practice which acknowledge that getting to grips with unfamiliar academic writing practices will usually be difficult and take time. For example, as my doctoral research suggested (French 2014), subject lecturers do not usually admit to students they have struggled, or do continue to struggle, with their own academic writing. Instead, the achievement of academic writing, more often than not, appears to students, at least, to be a kind of “trick” which lecturers, positioned within the Academy as subject experts, have mastered, and which students in turn, must learn to master by themselves (French 2014). Moreover, my research suggests that if there were more open dialogue between lecturers and their students about how they feel about academic writing, and the ways in which they have struggled, then closer, more emotionally attuned links around writing development could be created. Reclaiming the significance of struggle and even failure can, in this way, become an ultimately positive aspect of academic writing development which is especially valuable for those students who are very anxious about their ability to write and who have many, often very painful, experiences of struggling, and failing, with their academic writing (French 2017).

In emotionally-engaged academic writing communities of practice embedded lecturer and peer-led academic writing development activities can be offered seamlessly as part of the wider, subject-specific pedagogic process. For example, students should have the opportunity to engage collectively in formative, low stakes, disciplinary-based academic writing development practices (such as collaborative patchwork writing, blogs and reflective journals) through which they can begin to openly discuss and explore their fears and anxiety about aspects of academic writing as an everyday part of their subject learning. They could also be encouraged to read and discuss each other's written work (with an acknowledgement that to do so can make one feel very exposed and vulnerable). These community-based writing activities expose students to risk, uncertainty and experimentation, whilst simultaneously helping them to become more familiar with disciplinary writing practices as they get defined and reified over time through the community (Wingate, Andon and Cogo 2011). In this way, students can become more emotionally prepared for and supported through the demands that more individualised, high-stakes, summative written assignments (and the feedback that they receive about them) will make on them.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to explore why so many students are anxious and confused about academic writing. Moreover, it has argued that because of the strong emotions that it arouses, academic writing development should be explicitly connected to the affective domain and taught proactively as an emotionally engaging, social and communal practice, rather regarded as an individual's responsibility to master a set of individual attributes or skills. It calls, therefore, for academic writing development practices in HE to be understood through the constant interplay and interrelatedness of students, lecturers and texts (both those produced and consumed within subject specific programmes of study), not by the fixing of those elements and bodies into 'correct' configurations which are never openly discussed or articulated as part of the learning process.

Thinking in this way about the affective domain and the role that it plays in writing development has hopefully opened up a space for subject lecturers to think about how they can work sensitively with their students to demystify academic writing conventions and expectations so that they can better recognise, understand and tackle anxiety and confusion about academic writing practices in their disciplines. Expressly, it asks lecturers to consider (and even try to identify with) the emotional impact and practical application of their feedback on academic writing to students and to seek to facilitate more collaborative and supportive academic writing communities through their subject-specific teaching, which will help address anxiety and confusion by offering practical ways of meeting disciplinary expectations.

In conclusion, this paper maintains that lecturers in HE should never deny the importance of emotion and the affective domain to students' academic writing development. Furthermore, it argues that they should acknowledge that HE institutions can and should do a great deal more to ensure that the process of academic writing should never be a fearful and traumatic experience that students have to go through alone. Instead, the process of becoming a successful academic writer can be conceived of more profitably as a necessarily long and often difficult journey that should be undertaken with others (most obviously, one's peers and teachers), along a well-trodden path. This shared journey means that others within the disciplinary community, especially subject lecturers and generic learning developers, are available with advice and support and a ready acknowledgment that everyone who writes, and who cares about what and how they write, will inevitably expend blood, sweat and most likely tears along the way. In a highly charged writing environment like HE perhaps we have to accept that anxiety will always be present as part of the writing process. In short, it is crucial that emotion, in all its guises, be positively addressed and productively harnessed by educators in HE to ensure that students develop a positive academic writing identity to take them successfully through their studies.

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