

Privatised Academic Writing: Reflections on Access, Knowledge, and Policy

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Abstract

This dialogue responds to Neculai (2018) and argues for the need to recognise the character of academic literacies development and the policies governing that development as always emergent. It also reflects on the contributions that all, including students, make toward that development through their written work, as opposed to accepting the treatment of academic literacies development as a commodity to which access is given.

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Catalina Neculai's (2018) provocation on the privatisation of academic writing development raises a number of significant issues, of which I limit the focus of my response to just a few: The notion of public 'access' to academic literacies (and their development); the notion of privatization of knowledge and education; and the possibility of changes in policy regarding access, knowledge, and education.

Underlying my response is the importance of recognising the contribution made by all participants, students included, toward academic literacies development, understood as an ongoing project in which the public has a stake and for which it has a responsibility. The matter of granting public access to academic literacies is, from this perspective, not so much a matter of a public right to, or equality of distribution of, a known entity, but a matter of need—the need of the academy for the work students (and others) perform in sustaining and revising academic literacies and knowledge through their concrete labor, most often in the form of work with and on written language (Horner, 2017; Horner & Lu, 2014). While I do not see this perspective on academic literacies to be in conflict with Neculai's provocation, it seems to me to merit emphasis in countering a predominant view of higher education as something with which to 'gift' the public.

The commodification of academic knowledge and learning occludes the necessity of the contribution of the labor of knowers, including 'learners', to sustaining (and revising) knowledge. After all, as Wanda Orlikowski (2006, p. 460, emphasis in original) reminds us, knowledge is:

Not an external, enduring, or essential substance—but a dynamic and ongoing social accomplishment [...] a capability produced and reproduced in recurrent social practices. [...] *emergent* (arising from everyday activities and thus always 'in the making'), *embodied* (as evident in such notions as tacit knowing and experiential learning), and *embedded* (grounded in the situated socio-historic contexts of our lives and work). And [...] knowing is also always *material*.

This leads me to the issue of policy. As Neculai rightly insists, policies matter, hence the need for academic professionals to be involved in policy writing (and as a matter of faculty

governance). However, it is also worth remembering that policies are always and inevitably subjected to reworking by those charged with their implementation (Ellis & McNicholl, 2015; Fenwick & Farrell, 2012). At the most practical level, even those policies we may find highly restrictive, such as those Neculai references concerning the status and rewards officially assigned 'unclassified writing', are inevitably subject to redefinition in ways that might confound the writers of policy documents. However, those we may find liberating are also subject to reworking, for better and worse, hence the continued need to attend to how policies get reworked by administrators, teachers and students, for example.

All this is to recall that questioning the privatisation of academic writing development is at least in part a matter of recognising academic work that is already being done—who we acknowledge as doing such work, what it might look like, and what value to assign it—as it is a matter of work that needs to be undertaken. Privatisation occludes much of the work and the identities of those doing the work that contributes to the noetic economy for which 'academic writing' development is one cypher. One way to counter such effects is to bring to recognition to that work, these workers, and their value. Neculai's provocation is one instance of such a project.

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