Molinari, Julia. "Troubling Academic Writing: Problems and Implications for Higher Education." *What Makes Writing Academic: Rethinking Theory for Practice*. London,: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022. 17–45. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350243958.ch-1>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 10:56 UTC.

Copyright © Julia Molinari 2022. Released under a CC BY-NC-ND licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>). You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

Troubling Academic Writing: Problems and Implications for Higher Education

Introduction

It is ironic that some educational institutions ... militate against the very higher-order thinking that they are supposed to encourage.

(Andrews, 2010, p. 53)

In certain circles, English academic writing has developed a troublesome reputation. Its genres, jargons, grammar, syntax and overall forms have been pejoratively described by writing scholars as straightjackets, chains, pigeonholes, frauds and hoaxes. It has also been branded as discriminatory, elitist, exclusionary, colonial, dull, zombified and confusing. Far broader indictments are that academic writing's privileged status within the academy compounds the perception that alphabetic and monolingual texts are superior to other forms of knowledge communication, such as multimodal and multilingual texts. These are hefty value judgements on something that is so crucial to academic life at all levels, from undergraduate study onwards.

This chapter lays the foundations for the rest of the book by exposing some of the ways in which academic writing is (mis)understood and by highlighting some of the consequences of this confusion. In doing so, my intention is to show why academic writing is troublesome. I draw mainly on the context of EAP writing instruction in the UK, with which I am most familiar, but also refer to the US tradition of Rhetoric and Composition, especially where there are parallels. After some brief remarks about epistemology and ontology to establish the foundations for this and the ensuing chapters, I go on to trace the roots of the trouble to the ways in which academic writing has been reduced to a series of transferable mechanical skills. I then expose some of the implications. My staging of the problem will require even further background to do it justice and this I provide in Chapter 2, where I situate the trouble within its historical legacies.

The ‘Ologies’

An early, but swift, distinction between an epistemological and an ontological conceptualization of writing is necessary because it is the binary that seams the book: most of the time it keeps to the margins, but occasionally, it will take centre stage, particularly in Chapter 4, where I propose critical realism as a theory for explaining what makes writing academic.

The problem with academic writing, as I have come to know it, is (mis) understandings around *what* it is and *how* it gets taught. This begs further questions about what it means for something to be academic in the first place. At the root of these (mis)understandings are inconsistent ontological and epistemological distinctions between what academic writing is (its ontology) and what it does (its epistemology). Eliding this distinction has consequences.

Simply put, ontology is the study and classification of *what* things are. Epistemology is the study of *how* we make decisions about what things are. This matters for how we then classify things as being one thing rather than another. Epistemology is therefore associated with the methods and methodologies used to generate findings, whereas ontology is associated with what those findings are then classified as. Ontology and epistemology are co-extensive, meaning you cannot understand one without the other. For example, I can’t classify an apple as a fruit (ontology) until I have investigated what counts as a fruit and to what extent an apple fits in to that classification (epistemology). Similarly, I can’t classify writing as academic until I have investigated what it means for something to be academic and how writing fits in to that classification.

Here is a hopefully accessible, albeit caricatured, way of explaining this in relation to academic writing.

Popular textbooks have traditionally classified academic writing as *something* that is formal, objective, impersonal and so on (see, for example, Stephen Bailey (2006)). Other, less popular textbooks have classified academic writing as *something* that allows us to transform knowledge (see, for example, Lillis et al. (2015)). These are ontological classifications, each of which has implications for classroom instruction. If I classify academic writing as ‘impersonal’, I am likely to teach students to write certain kinds of texts, for example, ones that have features associated with being *impersonal* (such as the passive voice). On the other hand, if I classify academic writing as a transformative practice, I am likely to teach a student to do something that *transforms knowledge*: in the first scenario, the student is more likely to form the belief that what makes writing

academic are its impersonal forms and that for something to be 'academic', it needs to be impersonal. In the second scenario, the student is more likely to form the belief that what makes writing academic are a wider range of features, since there are many ways of transforming, or re-configuring, knowledge (see, for example, work by Fiona English (2011, 2015)).

Each ontological classification is the result of an epistemological finding. If what makes writing academic are its impersonal forms (ontology), this assumes that being impersonal is what it means to be academic because academia has been found to be the kind of place where impersonal claims are made (epistemology). If, on the other hand, we posit that what makes writing academic are its powers to transform knowledge (ontology), this assumes that transforming knowledge is what it means to be academic because academia has been found to be the kind of place where knowledge is transformed (epistemology).

Here is a sense of the confusion generated when these distinctions are elided in writing instruction. Sam is a semi-fictionalized but real UK university student whose words I have anonymized to protect their identity but to also signal that they represent the familiar refrain of many such students.

I got 48% in my essay and I don't understand why. I got distinctions in my Access course and when I was writing this essay, I thought it was good. I put in references, avoided personal pronouns, I looked at different aspects of the research question, my friend, who is really good academically, advised me to start with some context and give some definitions, but my tutor said I had too many ideas and they weren't really connected to the main question. I also don't really know what a paragraph is or how long it should be and what should go in the introduction and conclusion? Is the conclusion just a summary? I need to start writing my second essay and I just don't know where to start now. I want to do it right, but I don't know how. How do you write an academic essay? How is it different to what they taught me on my Access course? I know people who have done A-Levels and they also say it is completely different to an A-Level essay.

Sam is a casualty of misunderstandings about what makes writing academic. By asking *how do you write an academic essay*, they put their finger on the problems introduced above. These were that, firstly, academic writing cannot be ontologically reduced to its characteristics, such as being impersonal or having paragraphs. There is no such thing as a 'standard' academic essay because there

are several kinds. The reason there are several kinds of writing is that academic writing is doing and achieving different sorts of things. In fact, a far better designation for referring to the writing that takes place in the academy might be to use the plural form of ‘academic writings’ (exemplified in Chapter 3). Sam has formed the belief that an academic essay is a ‘certain kind of thing’ (ontology) that can be transferred across contexts. Had they been taught that academic writing is a method for representing knowledge, they might have been more open to understanding it epistemologically. An epistemological understanding of academic writing is more likely to have prepared Sam for the seemingly confusing feedback they had received because if writing is understood for the epistemological work that it does, it becomes easier to recognize that it will vary in its forms according to its purposes.

Having introduced the distinction between ontological and epistemological understanding of academic writing, I now highlight another dualism intended to further trouble what makes writing academic.

Enduring the Legacy of Skills versus Practices

Academic writing – how it is taught, talked and written about and then experienced – is dualistic. This dualism broadly consists of framing academic writing as either a *skill* (Hyland, 2006, p. 17) or as a *social practice* (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 159; Lillis & Curry, 2010a, p. 19), a distinction that has important implications for how academic writing is taught. References to this dualism resonate throughout the literatures in which writing is discussed from a UK EAP/Academic Literacies perspective (e.g. Hocking & Toh, 2010; Lea & Street, 1998; Scott & Lillis, 2007; Wingate & Tribble, 2012) and a US Composition Studies perspective (e.g. Anson & Moore, 2016; Downs & Wardle, 2007; Russell & Cortes, 2012). A ‘skill’ can be understood as the mechanical ability to turn, for example, an active sentence into a passive one. This ability requires *knowing how* to use grammar, regardless of context, purpose or audience. By contrast, a ‘social practice’ is *knowing that* the use of a passive or plural can be inappropriate. Skills can be further understood as being transferable to other academic contexts whereas social practices are less straightforwardly transferable because they are concerned with protean human activity that changes according to socio-academic contexts, purposes and intentions.

Distinctions between skills and practices are premised on broader sociologies of knowledge that differentiate between ‘knowing how’ to do something (for example, how to spell a word) and ‘knowing that’ (for example, that words can

have different meanings in different contexts). Skills thus become equated with ‘technical knowledge’ and social practices with ‘practical knowledge’: the former concerns knowledge of rules and techniques; the latter ‘consists of organised abilities to discern, judge and perform that are ... rooted in understanding, beliefs, values and attitudes Practical knowledge is acquired by living within the organised social world’ (Hirst, 1998, p. 152). Specifically, this dualism maps on to the distinction between procedural knowledge (knowing how to do something) and propositional knowledge (knowing that something is the case), whereby skills are examples of the former and practices of the latter (Fantl, 2017).

The roots of this dualism run deep and have evolved from translations of the ancient Greeks’ distinction between *epistêmê* (science/theory) and *technê* (craft/practice). As such, the dichotomy of skills and practices characterizes ‘Western’ thinking and it is traditionally traced to Aristotle’s ethical theory. Aristotle describes as *poiesis* those human actions that require a form of knowledge he called *technê*, which has been translated as a rule-governed ‘ability to make’ an artefact, such as a pot. Because *poiesis* requires the maker to know in advance what the result of their activity will be, it is not the same as *praxis*, which is an action aimed at ‘doing’ some morally worthwhile ‘good’. Within the Aristotelian tradition, political, social and educational activities fall under *phronesis*, meaning wisdom and deliberation and, as such, they are aligned with *praxis*, not *poiesis* (Carr, 1998; Hogan, 2015), because of their open-ended reflective and explorative nature.

The legacy of this dualism survives in current philosophical, sociological and educational discussions about how theory relates to practice. However, to make matters confusing, current understandings of ‘theory’ are probably closer to what Aristotle meant by *praxis* (i.e. reflection and deliberation), whereas *poiesis* is possibly closer to the idea of what we now call ‘practice’ (as in the repetition of a skill to achieve an outcome known in advance, e.g. a painting or riding a bike). The sematic slipperiness of these terms might explain why misunderstandings arise from their usage. For example, modern-day understandings of ‘skills’ are associated with practical and technical abilities (*poiesis* and *technê*) rather than theoretical dispositions (*praxis*); yet, each shares attributes of the other: a joiner is both skilled in a technical sense and is reflective in a theoretical sense because they need geometrical knowledge to deliberate that a range of practical possibilities for shaping the wood is available. American educationalist Mike Rose (2005) has endeavoured to blur these distinctions in his sociological accounts of the tacit propositional knowledge (knowing that) needed to perform the highly skilled labour of ‘American workers’; writing scholars Graff and Birkenstein (2006) do the same when they encourage the use of ‘know how’

templates as a way to ‘demystify’ the practice of academic writing; and Warner (2018, p. 20) goes further by subsuming ‘skills’ under ‘practices’ alongside ‘knowledge’, ‘habits of mind’ and ‘attitudes’.

Whilst I acknowledge the confusions underpinning the skills-practice divide (such as the fact that propositional and procedural knowledge cannot be seamlessly prised apart; that skills are needed for practice and vice versa; and that both theory and practice guide human actions), in theorizing about whether academic writing is a skill or a practice and what any of this has to do with what makes it academic, I have deliberately chosen to foreground a particular view. This view is that academic writing instruction, in both the UK and United States, has, historically, erred on the side of skills, understood as technical abilities associated with knowing how to do something (*poiesis*). Along the way, the conflation of academic writing with a skill has generated misunderstandings about what makes writing academic. It has done this by proposing templates as ‘formulaic devices ... that encourage passive learning or lead students to put their writing on automatic pilot’ (Graff & Birkenstein, 2006, p. xxii). In this sense, skills are more readily seen as ‘limitations’ that encourage ‘mere habits’ (Dewey, 1916). Such negative framings of skills as habit-forming underscore several literatures that critique the ways in which academic writing is taught to university students (see, for example, Yun & Standish (2018)). Skills-based approaches to writing can be further understood with reference to what anthropologist and New Literacy scholar Brian Street (1984) called the ‘ideological and autonomous approach’. This model ‘encourages a transparency approach to language and transmission understanding of language pedagogy’ (Fischer, 2015, p. 83). What Fischer means by ‘transparency’ and ‘transmission’, respectively, is that the meaning of words is treated as unequivocal (i.e. clear) and that this meaning can be taught and learnt (i.e. transferred) without the need to interpret why the words are used, by whom and in which contexts. As such, the autonomous model frames academic writing as a cognitive skill that exists independently of its contexts and which, for example, ‘does not recognise that learning rests on the integrated development of both writing and reading within the disciplinary discourse’ (Turner, 2018, p. 134). Zamel (1998a, 1998b) has similarly argued that the autonomous model presents the learning of language in essentialist terms, namely as a skill that is decontextualized from the ‘intellectual work’ that it has to do. For example, learning how to compose a paragraph (a skill, closer in meaning to *poiesis*) is not the same as understanding the ‘intellectual work’ that paragraphs do (a practice, closer in meaning to *praxis*), which is to cumulatively build arguments (Thomson, 2018a): it is for this reason that there can be no template for writing them. A paragraph can vary in length

and structure because it is part of an argument that forms a broader deliberation (Hayot, 2014), a fact that was not made clear to Sam, my semi-fictional student.

In EAP, the skill–practice dichotomy reveals similar binaries. On the one hand, it foregrounds an atomistic and technical understanding of what makes writing ‘academic’. It does this by conflating skills-based approaches with the teaching and learning of discrete but tangible textual items, such as lists of ‘academic words’ (Coxhead, 2011; Paquot, 2010) or rules for ‘paragraph structures’ (Bailey, 2006). A skills-based approach becomes problematic because, for example, it remains silent on the more elusive academic practice of developing an ‘academic voice’ (Elbow, 1994; Matsuda & Tardy, 2008) or on cultivating an awareness of readership (audience) (Richardson, 1990b). On the other hand, the more ‘holistic’, reflective and complex understanding of literacy associated with the social practice approach can lose sight of the particulars needed to make a text ‘academic’. For example, a social practice approach will typically downplay the centrality of linguistic ‘accuracy’ or question what is meant by an appropriate ‘academic style’ on the grounds that these vary or that they embody exclusionary ideologies that ignore a writer’s purpose and the experiences they bring with them (Holbrook et al., 2020; Lillis, 2001; Scott, 2013; Thesen & Cooper, 2013; Turner, 2018). In this sense, both approaches – skills-based and social practice – are problematic as neither is satisfactory in pinning down what makes writing academic. By isolating textual and linguistic features from the wider social practices of having purposes and audiences, skills-based writing pedagogies and assessments (such as IELTS) weaken the academic credibility of the resulting written text (see Moore and Morton (2005) and Warner (2018)). Moreover, emphasizing skills (knowing how) at the expense of practices (knowing that) can lead to ‘hollow’ and ‘stilted’ expressions aimed at displaying language instead of thought. This trade-off, combined with weak and unsupported arguments, can result in ‘bad writing’ (Helms-Park & Stapleton, 2003). Yet, despite there being no evidence that correlates grammatical and lexical accuracy *per se* with good academic writing,¹ prescriptive, skills-based, straightjacket (Hamilton

¹ This is a controversial claim that I do not develop in this book. Suffice to say that I am aware of a vast body of literatures on this controversy. Hyland, K. (2016). *Teaching and researching writing* (3rd ed.). Abingdon: Routledge., Rose, M. (1989). *Lives on the boundary: the struggles and achievements of America's underprepared*. New York: Free Press. Collier Macmillan Publishers., Warner, J. (2018). *Why they can't write: Killing the five-paragraph essay and other necessities*. Johns Hopkins University Press., including ongoing debates about editorial bias with regards to standards of accuracy in academic writing. Politzer-Ahles, S., Girolamo, T., & Ghali, S. (2020). Preliminary evidence of linguistic bias in academic reviewing. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 47, 100895. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2020.100895>, Politzer-Ahles, S., Holliday, J. J., Girolamo, T., Spyckalskae, M., & Harper Berksonf, K. (2016). Is linguistic injustice a myth? A response to Hyland (2016). *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 34, 4–8. <https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jslw.2016.09.003>.

& Pitt, 2009) approaches that focus on grammatical accuracy – often referred to pejoratively as ‘essayist’ literacies – have dominated the EAP approach to writing. Reasons for such a skills-based ontology of academic writing vary and are well documented. They range from the ubiquity of commercial assessments, whose imperative is to standardize testing, to the over-reliance of pedagogy on commercial textbooks (Bennett, 2009; Feak & Swales, 2013; Harwood, 2005; Leung et al., 2016; Tribble, 2015; Turner, 2004, 2018).

However, when standard forms of academic English are questioned and disrupted, for example, by being re-genred² (English, 2011) or translanguaged³ (Wei, 2016), this raises concerns about where, how and whether we can draw boundaries between what counts and does not count as ‘academic’ (cf. Canagarajah & Lee (2013); Scott (2013)). Chapters 4 and 5 focus on theoretical and pedagogical approaches to overcome the muddles generated by the skills *versus* practices dualism, but, before we get there, more needs to be said about each to further appreciate their influence on academic writing instruction.

Skills-based approaches can be further said to encourage and perpetuate the ‘myth of transience’ (Russell, 2002). The ‘myth’ consists in the mistaken belief that writing can be taught in transitory, temporary and isolated ways without an authentic purpose. It further suggests that whatever skills are learnt in a writing class can be seamlessly transferred to all other contexts: Sam’s confusion can, therefore, be explained by the myth of transience. Such approaches reflect the widespread perception that writing instruction can be outsourced and learnt separately from the disciplines, a phenomenon that has been criticized by American educationalist and writing scholar Mike Rose (1985, p. 355): ‘The belief persists in the American university that if we can just do x, or y, the problem of poor student writing will be solved ... and higher education will be able to return to its real work [of teaching disciplinary content]’. Rose (1989) has lamented the conflation of learning to write with the acquisition of cognitive skills (such as memorizing rules). He claims that when we collapse the process of writing into the acquisition of skills, we risk sidelining attitudes and dispositions that may be more conducive to developing writing abilities. These include the

² ‘Re-genring’ is a term used by English (2011) to describe the process of re-working an essay by using a different genre, for example, from prose to a dialogue. This allows ‘students to introduce new perspectives, debate new issues and show a greater sense of ownership over the topic than was apparent in their original essays’ (2011, p. 1) and develops critical thinking in ways that are not text-centred.

³ ‘Translanguaging’ is a term used by several sociolinguists, including Canagarajah (2011), Wei (2016) and Leung et al. (2016) to describe the multilingual practice of communicating by drawing on one’s full linguistic repertoire to re-appropriate or re-define meanings. Translanguaging is viewed as a positive practice and signals a departure from framing ‘interference’ from other languages as negative.

need to nurture everyday exploratory and personal literacies (as also argued by Williams (2009); Williams and Zenger (2012)) and to cultivate the imagination and a sense of 'wonder'.

Rose traces the conflation of skills with writing ability back to the early-twentieth-century writing curriculum which was influenced by studies in psychology. These were used to inform pedagogies based on 'memory and drill' and the mechanics of grammatical 'dos and don'ts'. He labelled this approach to literacy as 'essentialist' and 'exclusionary', further claiming that it assumes the meaning of words is straightforwardly accessible i.e. 'clear' to all. Instead, argues Rose, it excludes learners who do not share its underlying conceptual frameworks. What better explains students' misunderstandings of academic discourse is often not their lack of 'academic' vocabulary but their ignorance of the 'semiotic reach' of academic words and of the conceptual frameworks and disciplinary traditions they belong to. His poignant example of a student, Lucia, is illustrative. Lucia, whose brother's mental illness drew her to a psychology degree, abandoned her course because her first-hand experience of psychological trauma differed from the academic depictions of it. The university's response to Lucia's difficulties was to remove her from the psychology class and send her to language lessons that would 'fix' and 'remedy' her lack of understanding. Rose's contention is that 'remedial' approaches to developing academic literacy that are removed from their disciplinary discourses are unlikely to help students become writers because Lucia is not so much 'suffering from a lack of specialist vocabulary' as she is ignorant of the histories of concepts that this vocabulary refers to (Rose, 1989, pp. 192):

The discourse of academics is marked by terms and expressions that represent an elaborate set of shared concepts and orientations: alienation, authoritarian personality, the social construction of the self, determinism, hegemony, equilibrium, intentionality, recursion, reinforcement and so on. This language weaves through so many lectures and textbooks, is internal to so many learned discussions, that it's easy to forget what a foreign language it can be. Freshmen are often puzzled by the talk they hear in the classrooms, but what is important to note here is that their problem is not simply one of limited vocabulary. If we see that problem as knowing or not knowing a list of words, as some quick-fix remedies suggest, then we'll force glossaries on students and miss the complexity of the issue.

Learning any discipline requires access to 'scholarly conversations' (Healey et al., 2020) that have a semiotic reach extending far beyond lists of academic

vocabulary. Moreover, since these remedial approaches are also frequently associated with skills-based approaches (see Anson & Moore, 2016; Myers Zawacki & Cox, 2014; Russell, 2002), skills also become enmeshed in the language of medicalization (*diagnose problems, drop-in clinic*) and failure (*fix, correct*), further contributing to a deficit approach to the teaching of academic writing. This indicates that skills cannot be understood outside the discipline by decontextualized rote learning and grammatical drills or gap-fills. The ‘myth of transience’ thus raises questions around what makes writing academic in the sense that if Lucia’s first-hand experience of psychology, a phenomenon that is as much a personal experience as it is an academic discipline, is not reflected or recognized in academic representations of psychology, then what does it mean to study psychology, or any other domain of human knowledge, at university? We know from standpoint theory that knowledge is also ‘situated knowledge’. This situated epistemological stance re-centres the knower, in this case Lucia, as a legitimate source of knowledge in virtue of her ‘insider knowledge’ (Wylie, 2003). Removing this insider knowledge from the domain of academic knowledge therefore serves to compound, rather than hold to account, epistemic hierarchies that de-legitimize what counts as knowledge and whose knowledge counts. And since academic writing is both a method of knowledge enquiry (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005) and knowledge representation (Atkinson, 2013; Thomson, 2018c), then how does Lucia’s knowledge come to be represented in writing if it is excluded from the outset? In Chapter 5, I suggest ways to answer this question.

So far, I have been implying that a skills-based approach to academic writing is insufficient to determine what makes a text academic. This is because skills-based approaches encourage the conflation of some characteristics of what it means for something to be academic (such as ‘formal’ academic lexis) with what academic writing is at the expense of other characteristics (such as situated knowledge and its related language). I now explain what is meant by ‘practices’ in relation to writing and conclude that this approach, too, is insufficient to determine what makes writing academic.

As discussed in Knorr Cetina et al. (2001), practices can be broadly understood as ‘arrays of human activity’ (2001, p. 11) organized around ‘patterns’, ‘relations’ and ‘interdependencies’ that cannot be reduced to the micro-activities of the individual. Rather, since they are part of our propositional knowledge (knowing that), they can guide and monitor our actions, including our procedural knowledge (i.e. the ‘knowing how’ of skills), without which practices could

not be enacted. Practices are also closer to the classical meaning of *praxis* and involve reflection and deliberation.

Practices are generally viewed more favourably than skills by literacy theorists (Scott & Lillis, 2007), by philosophers (MacIntyre, 1985) and by progressive educationalists (Dewey, 1916). They are seen as *activities* that require reflection and thought, social interaction and a sense of purpose that changes to suit the aims, beliefs, values, experiences and choices of, in this case, writers (Scott, 2000; Williams, 2017). For sociolinguist and literacies scholar Theresa Lillis (2013, pp. 78),

practice signals two key principles: an empirical commitment to observe and explore what, where and how people read and write, including their perspectives on what they do, as well as their values and interests; a theoretical interest in seeking explanations for the nature and consequences of what people do, including a focus on issues of power and agency drawing on notions from sociological and critical discourse theories.

The spirit of Lillis's sociological, ethnographic and normative understanding of practice resonates with the following claims by moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre (cited in Hogan, 2015, pp. 372):

By a practice I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established co-operative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved are systematically extended.

MacIntyre's views on the role played by 'human powers', 'agency', 'activity' and 'purpose' in 'social activity' echo those of Lillis, who unequivocally foregrounds the role that 'people' have in shaping practices through their values, interests, experiences and agencies. This did not happen in Lucia's case because her experience and situated knowledge of psychology were not valued or deemed relevant to the academic discipline of psychology – as a consequence of her knowledge not being valued, the way that she expressed it in writing was not deemed to be academically appropriate. What MacIntyre's understanding of practice further indexes is its *processual* and *complex* nature whereby the standards of excellence in any given practice, such as the practice of writing academically, are relative to the practice itself, not to any specific token (product or artefact) of writing, such as an essay or 'academic' vocabulary: a skill thus becomes a means to an end, that end being a practice that human agents can

‘extend’. As we shall see, this has important implications for what makes writing academic.

Drawing on the practice of farming as her example, Fitzmaurice (2010, p. 47) illustrates what MacIntyre meant by ‘practice’ and the ‘standards of excellence’ needed to achieve it. Specifically, Fitzmaurice is concerned with the practice of teaching and with teachers’ agencies in transforming their practices. She argues that teaching requires human dispositions, values, virtues and qualities (*standards of excellence*) that transcend the application of techniques (or skills). If practices are understood as the ends of human activity, then when these ends change, so must the skills required to achieve them:

The planting of crops is not a practice, but farming is, as are the enquiries of physics, chemistry, biology and the work of the historian, the musician and the painter. A practice involves standards of excellence and to enter into a practice is to accept these standards and to judge one’s own performance against them. The goods internal to a practice can only be had by involvement in that practice unlike external goods such as money, status, prestige, which can be achieved in many ways.

A similar argument can be mobilized for writing. When academic writing is understood as a practice, it too requires an understanding of a range of *standards of excellence* that are internal to it. These might include specific disciplinary ways of representing knowledge or understanding how to re-purpose a text for different audiences, but they may also include more elusive qualities such as ‘writtenness’, discussed in Turner (2018). ‘Writtenness’ refers to qualities of ‘good writing’ that are difficult to pinpoint, that can be achieved in different ways and that experienced writers simply ‘recognise’ (Becker, 1986). The practice of writing is also the practice of writing in and for institutional framings, constraints and policy, where *standards of excellence* vary (recalling feminist epistemologist Sarah Harding (1995) on ‘strong objectivity’) and where communities of scholars are required to reach agreements about what counts as disciplinary writing (see, for example, research by Alvesson et al. (2017); McCulloch (2017); Tusting et al. (2019)). Different genres also serve different purposes, with some, like the PhD thesis, possibly no longer being fit-for-purpose (Paré, 2017, 2018). Specifically, Paré argues that the traditional ‘big book format’ of the PhD requires skills that are obsolete, such as the ability to work alone, when much of academia and other professions require collaboration, co-authorship and versatility (Carmichael-Murphy, 2021; Thomson, 2018b). As such, the thesis understood as a *practice*, rather than as a skill, requires *standards of excellence* that adhere to

the activities of research and enquiry, rather than to the skills required to achieve these standards, such as referencing: clearly, these skills are necessary, but they are simply means to achieving the practice; they are not the ends of writing a PhD thesis (or other academic text). Since they are means to an end, they are more likely to change because they are external to the practice of achieving a PhD, which is driven by internal standards of excellence that could evolve and be achieved by deploying new skills. These new skills may not even include writing, as I showcase in Chapter 3, but will always be instrumental to upholding the standards of excellence that inhere to the academic practice of research and enquiry.

In my endeavour to rethink dominant academic writing theories for practice, MacIntyre affords me an opportunity to signal something that will become important in understanding the theory of critical realism that I propose in Chapter 4, namely the importance of human agency in transforming practices. It is humans, MacIntyre reminds us, who have the ‘powers’ to be the agents of change that mobilize ‘transformations’ in any given practice (1985, pp. 193, emphasis added):

What is distinctive in a practice is the way in which conceptions of the relevant goods and ends which the technical skills serve – and every practice does require the exercise of practical skills – are *transformed* and enriched by those extensions of *human powers* and by that regard for its internal goods which are partially definitive of each particular practice or type of practice.

What this entails for thinking about academic writing is that when writing is conceived as a practice, it is the writers (*human powers*), not the skills, who through reflection, deliberation and understanding (*by that regard for*) drive transformations and determine what writing could be. Clearly, institutional constraints and expectations influence the degree of agency that writers have but, as sociologist and critical theorist Norman Fairclough also reminds us, subjects have the capacity ‘to act individually or collectively as agents’ in opposing [ideological] practices (Fairclough, 1992, pp. 72–3; 80).

As mentioned at the start of this section, an over-emphasis on writing as a practice raises troubling concerns about the standards of excellence that are internal to the practice and about who sets these standards. When we foreground the importance of agency in determining standards, we run the risk of undermining the rules and conventions that have accrued over time (arguably, for good reasons) and of *praxis* being so open-ended that it loses its practical reach of each purpose. Laurel Richardson dramatically captures this

tension in her book *Fields of Play: Constructing an Academic Life*, where she reflects on the academic field of sociology and on how sociological knowledge is represented in the academic literatures of her discipline. In one of her semi-fictionalized dialogues, Richardson disrupts standard written representations of sociology by publishing her research as poetry instead of prose, much to the consternation and hostility of her fellow conferees. In the edited extract quoted below, Richardson is the fictionalized *Professor Z* addressing other eminent scholars of sociology at a conference (1997, pp. 197–206):

Professor Z: Why prose? Prose, I submit, is not the only way to represent sociological understanding. Another way is through poetic representation

...

Conferee 1: Where is the f——-king validity?

Conferee 2: What about reliability?

Conferee 3: Truth? Where's truth?

Conferee 4: And reality?

Conferee 1: You have lost your f——-king mind!!!

Professor Z: (takes field notes)

...

Lundberg: (returns to the stage) Oh ye of little memory and less imagination: Sociology is what sociologists do ... If a sociologist writes and publishes poems in a sociology journal, the poems are sociology.

... Professor Z: I know why these people are so threatened. They fear that if any rule is violated, all rules might be violated. They fear lack of control not only in their professional but in their personal worlds. The subtext of the question, "But is it sociology," is their silenced fear: "If poetry is sociology and I can't do it, what happens to my identity, my prestige, my status – my place in the pecking order – ME? ... Me, me ..."

The tensions that this ignites about standards of excellence and the skills needed to achieve these standards (in this case, whether to represent sociological knowledge using poetry or prose) in order for the discipline of sociology to be recognized as 'sociology' are mirrored in the questions I am raising when I ask what makes academic writing 'academic'. At the heart of Richardson's concerns is a disagreement about which skills are considered to be internal and which are considered to be external to the practice of sociology (and who has the agency to decide). Richardson's reason for choosing poetry over prose to represent sociological knowledge is that the rhythms of poetry seem to be

attuned to re-presenting the embodied and situated voices of the women whose stories she is re-telling. The standard academic prose of disciplinary sociology would not have captured the richness of these stories and would therefore have missed the meanings and emotions of Richardson's interlocutors. Richardson's use of poetry to enact the practice of sociology can be understood in terms of what MacIntyre calls skills that are 'external' to the practice of sociology: prose, poetry, drawings, animations and any number of modes of representation are methods for representing sociological knowledge that are external to the disciplinary practice of sociology because they can be understood as skills that are deployed elsewhere, i.e. they are not inherently sociological (another way of understanding the distinction between internal and external skills is in terms of essential and non-essential). Her fellow conferees, however, objected to her use of poetry on the grounds that they perceived prose to be a skill that is 'internal to the practice' of sociology and to achieving its standards of excellence. The use of the passive or active voice in academic writing and any number of markers of standard academic prose generate similar tensions because they are seen to be inherent in the practice of academic writing. Who determines what counts as an internal or external skill creates tensions between agency and structure, namely the extent to which, on the one hand, academic writers, at all levels, are required and expected to follow the rules and, on the other, the extent to which they are able and enabled to define what the standards of excellence are and what skills are needed to achieve them. The philosophy and sociology of critical realism attempt to reconcile these tensions. Before then, more needs to be said about the specific consequences of reducing the practice of academic writing to a set of finite skills.

Implications of Reductive Approaches to Academic Writing

In addition to the problem of deciding which skills are internal or external, there are undesirable, possibly unintended, consequences of reducing academic writing to a set of prescriptive transferable skills. I describe these consequences in turn as aesthetic and socio-ethical.

Aesthetic Implications

In a book on the difficulty of being (*La difficulté d'être*), French writer, dramatist, poet and film director Jean Cocteau made a fleeting reference to the nature of

writing that illustrates what I am calling the ‘aesthetic’ problem. His words are thoroughly lost in translation so I will quote them in French first and then translate them (Cocteau, 1957, p. 151):

- *Écrire est un acte d’amour. S’il ne l’est pas, il n’est qu’écriture*
- My translation: *Écrire* (writing) is an act of love; when it is not, it is simply *écriture* (script, also writing).

Cocteau’s distinction between *écrire* (to write – verb and process) and *écriture* (writing – noun and product) captures how academic writing instruction, such as EAP, has tended to represent academic writing, namely as *écriture*. By conceptualizing it as a formulaic product stripped of love, emotion and feeling, cleansed of the impurities of the ‘difficulty of being’ and of the inherent ‘messiness’ of ontological representation (Law, 2004), academic writing instruction teaches students to write scripts, not write.

Understood as a product, or script, a piece of text rather than a process, academic writing as *écriture* becomes an object of standardized convention, structure, formality, clarity and logic, or, in the words of political philosopher Jonathan Wolff, nothing but ‘a dull read’ that leads to ‘literary boredom’ (Wolff, 2007). Wolff further laments the genre’s obsessive focus on ‘clarity’ and on ‘making every move explicit’, an act, he says, which kills suspense, removes surprise and saps joy. Such joylessness is inherent in what the reader will recognize as familiar attributes of academic writing: formal, logical, linear, clear, concise, balanced, more ‘algorithmic than human’, as Warner might describe it (2018). These characterizations are common in EAP teacher feedback and their origins can be traced to popular textbooks and manuals on how to write academically as well as to university and library web pages with advice on study skills and ‘how to write essays’: as a student reading this, you may be familiar with advice and feedback that tells you to structure your argument ‘logically’. As a teacher reading this, you may recognize what is arguably shorthand for your lack of comprehension or knowledge, namely a comment in the margin of a student script about their ‘lack of clarity’ (as opposed to your incomprehension). Significantly, none of these characterizations suggest that academic writing is being either written or read as an *act of love*.

The distinction evoked by *écrire* and *écriture* is exemplified in the context of American academic writing instruction, specifically in controversies around who is responsible for teaching academic writing (Rose, 1989, p. 207):

Anything longer than the sentence (even two or three sentences strung together) is considered *writing* and the teaching of writing shall be the province of the English Department. Anything at the sentence level or smaller (like filling words and phrases into a workbook) is to be considered grammar review and that falls within the domain of the remedial programme.

Here, Rose could easily be likening the writing taught by English departments with the more prosaic beauty of *écrire* and the writing taught to students such as Lucia (the psychology student who was sent to remedial classes) as *écriture*. Along with several other educationalists concerned with literacy, social justice and access to higher education (Judd, 2003; Lillis, 2001; Russell, 2002; Sperlinger et al., 2018), Rose laments the disciplinary and institutional divides that create binaries between ‘writing’ as prose (*écrire*), taught by professors of English literature, and ‘writing’ as a mechanical skill, as *écriture*, taught by writing tutors in ‘corrective’ writing centres, library services or separate language units. Units that serve the academic disciplines in this way have been described as ‘butlers’ (Raimes, 1991) who are not integral partners in the shared endeavour of communicating knowledge.⁴ In this sense, academic writing instructors are the ‘underlabourers’ (Bhaskar, 1989) of the disciplines, just like philosophy is to the disciplines, invisibly working to keep the academic show on the road, but rarely invited to dine at the disciplinary table where ideas are questioned and norms are challenged. Indeed, from a UK perspective, academic writing scholar Ken Hyland has described these ‘remedial’ units as ‘handmaidens’ and highlighted the way in which EAP practitioners (2006, p. 34)

have generally been seen as inhabiting the less glamorous, low rent neighbourhoods of the academy and this is particularly true of those concerned with English for Academic Purposes, which is generally regarded as a handmaiden to those ‘proper’ disciplines which are more directly engaged in the serious business of constructing knowledge or discovering truth. EAP, in fact, has come to be regarded as an almost mercantile activity and attracted to itself negatively evaluative concepts such as pragmatic, cost-effective and functional, untroubled by theoretical issues or questions of power as it merrily seeks to accommodate students to the faceless and impersonal prose of their disciplines.

There can be little beauty in ‘faceless and impersonal prose’, but the dullness lamented by Wolff is potentially more insidious because it indexes deeper

⁴ For a nuanced account of why this segregation endures in the UK, see Ding, A., & Bruce, I. (2017). *The English for academic purposes practitioner: Operating on the edge of academia* (P. Macmillan, Ed.).

epistemological and ontological consequences. To appreciate these consequences, we must briefly return to the skills–practice dualism.

The tension between academic writing as a skill and academic writing as a social practice re-emerges when framed by likening the skills-based approach to the ‘servant’ metaphors invoked above by both Raimes (*butler*) and Hyland (*handmaiden*) and the social practice approach to what Hyland has elsewhere referred to as ‘transgression’. In the literatures on writing as a social practice, writing is described as ‘transformative’ rather than ‘transgressive’, but, connotations aside, what the transformative/transgressive metaphor signals is that the academy is a site of learning, creating and transforming knowledge (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987). What this means is that university students are expected to engage critically with knowledge by simultaneously learning it and critiquing it. Since the purpose of EAP is to facilitate access to the academy, it follows that EAP should be a site for *both* learning and transforming knowledge. Arguably, therefore, in addition to ensuring learners become knowledgeable about received norms for writing academically, EAP has a responsibility to prepare students for transforming this knowledge. This transformation, or ‘transgression’, might include becoming knowledgeable about norms that exist beyond those that are ‘received’, such as knowledge about who sets these norms and why; about the epistemological and ontological consequences of choosing to follow some norms rather than others; about the risks and ethical implications of choosing to follow prescribed norms; and about student agency in transforming these norms.

Knowing why some kinds of English academic writing have evolved to be ‘faceless and impersonal’ (and to be valued as such) and why other kinds have not can help students, like Sam, make sense of the confusing writing feedback they receive, but it can also help teachers provide nuanced rather than prescriptive feedback. Knowing, for example, why different supervisors, different disciplines and different editors have differing norms regarding the use of personal pronouns and other grammatical choices can empower writers to make, accept, reject and generally negotiate their writing styles with their teachers and assessors, including their publishers. For example, knowing that the convention to avoid personal pronouns in English academic writing is not universally shared, that it is historically contingent and relative to disciplinary orientations is likely to raise writers’ consciousness and assuage their confusion. Conceptualizations of English academic writing, particularly the version of academic writing that is popularized, are 500 years old. They owe their imaginaries to the legacy of a Cartesian and then Lockean worldview which

assumes that language and therefore writing are a reliable and unique proxy for representing the world (Bennett, 2015; Turner, 2010). In academic writing instruction, this legacy translates into linguistic prescriptions to sound 'objective' 'clear' and 'transparent' and encourages students to favour some linguistic forms over others. These include choosing the passive form over the active; third person pronouns over first; and nominalized sentence constructions that reduce the number of main verbs (because main verbs require subjects that can make the writing sound 'subjective').

Together, these prescriptions make for rather dull *écriture*.

Socio-Cultural and Ethical Implications

A further implication of EAP's reductive approach to writing is that it standardizes to a textual monoculture that makes academic writing look the same across the disciplinary spectrum, regardless of who has written it and why. This has broader socio-cultural and ethical repercussions.

Advocates of multimodal and multilingual approaches to literacy question the supremacy of the alphabet and of English-only texts and remind us of the socio-semiotic affordances of writing texts that draw on a range of modalities to create meaning. Palmeri (2012), Canagarajah (2018), Blommaert and Horner (2017) and Archer and Breuer (2015) are just a few of the literacy scholars who regularly remind us that conventions both endure and are flouted chronotopically (across time and space). They also warn that universalizing standards and rules thwarts multiculturalism (Björkvall, 2016, p. 28):

In unstable social environments conventions disappear ... convention is actually an expression which comes from a period of relative semiotic stability where the exercise of power, not normally even noticed because it is very subtle, leads to a kind of agreement to do things in a certain way. But in a deeply multicultural world – a hugely diverse world – there are no such agreements. And, as you know, in Anglophone Ph.D. s in many places you can now use the first person, 'I', which you could not do 25 years ago.

Pedagogically, there is a commonly held assumption that conventions are necessary rather than contingent and that second language learners need to 'learn the rules before they can break them'. This forms the basis of what has been called the 'deficit model' of academic writing (see, for example, Bennett, 2009; Hathaway, 2015; Turner, 2004; Wingate & Tribble, 2012), whereby writers are told they must 'take themselves out of their writing and never use

“I” (Parker, 2017; Rodríguez, 2017) or that the five-paragraph essay (Bernstein & Lowry, 2017) sets the standard for what counts as academic writing (see Sowton (2016), whose model ‘academic’ texts are five-paragraph essays and the ubiquitous 250-word IELTS essay). Yet, this approach is chained to ancient history. It is entirely modelled on the classical spoken and then written rhetorics of Aristotelian and Quintilian literacy practices. These posited that what counted as *argument* in the public fora of ancient Rome could be narrowed down to five parts: the *exordium* (the introduction), the *narratio* (the events in question), the *confirmatio* (the argument/claims), the *refutatio* (the counter-argument/claims) and the *peroratio* (summary) (Andrews 2010). As will become apparent in Chapter 4, arguments are by far more varied, especially when expressed multimodally (Molinari, 2021).

Interestingly and in relation to the question of what makes writing academic, the familiar form of the five-paragraph essay is considered to be a sign of ‘bad student writing’ for US Composition Studies, ‘whereas in the EAP program the same form is considered “an extremely serviceable template”’ (Tardy & Jwa, 2016). Tardy and Jwa explain the predilection for having standard models as follows: ‘Students and teachers ... desire a tool that can quickly and easily be applied to immediate writing needs’ (2016, p. 59). The fact there are also significant inconsistencies in the advice given by academic style guide books should further alert us to engage critically with what and whose purposes these rules serve. On the one hand, guide books tell writers to avoid colourful words and the use of the personal pronoun ‘I’; on the other, they encourage the use of vivid language and avoidance of the passive (Sword, 2012). Similarly, as shown in Ball and Loewe (2017), the very existence of unqualified, or ‘bad’, writing advice should suffice to undermine uncritical acceptance of what the rules of good writing are and who has the authority to break them. Indeed, with regards to the common refrain that one must ‘learn the rules before one can break them’, Canagarajah (2021) replies ‘you can have it both ways’ because there is no such thing as ‘standard’ English. The norms of a social practice like academic writing can be discussed, negotiated, chosen to fit the purpose, and re-created. When it comes to what makes writing academic, it seems that we actually can have our cake and eat it!

What is emerging from the discussion so far is that socio-cultural norms, however deeply embedded in tradition and however pedagogically reasonable, can be questioned and are, as such, questionable. Uncritical assumptions about ‘rules being learnt before they are broken’ can be challenged because, quite simply, these rules are not universally shared. And in virtue of not being universally shared,

they are ‘not the only possibility’ (Sousanis, 2015). Opening up possibilities for academic writing is important because if higher education remains dependent on and reduced to monolingual (i.e. English) and monomodal (e.g. language) standards of writing proficiency, measuring academic success against language proficiency alone and against a narrow variety of this proficiency, it will encourage a deficit-model approach that judges students’ diverse repertoires as ‘deficient’ rather than as resourceful: multilingual, multimodal, dyslexic, autistic, artistic and multicultural students have wide-ranging and diverse literacies that could be harnessed as resources instead of straightjacketed into anachronistic norms, or even cancelled. Standardization based on contingent and outdated norms becomes at best disingenuous and at worst exclusionary because it ignores the diverse identities of writers. Epistemically, it is also self-defeating, since knowledge is best arrived at via multiple representations.

A further problem with reducing writing to a monoculture is that if we agree that language is an expression of diverse socio-cultural identities (Evans, 2014; Holmes, 1992), then by insisting on linguistic homogeneity in academic writing, we are also insisting on ‘cultural and social’ homogeneity. By requiring everybody to write and speak in the same way, just as was once the case with RP (Received Pronunciation), English-speaking universities are creating the conditions for a homogenized academy that communicates via a monoliteracy modelled on *écriture* rather than *écriture*. I would further contend that this encourages the conditions for what sociologists Collyer et al. (2019), drawing on the work of African philosopher Paulin Hountondji (1995), call ‘academic dependencies’ and ‘extraversion’, the phenomenon whereby universities in the Global South model themselves on those of the rich North. A standardized monoliteracy culture, that conveniently also happens to be the literacy of the dominant universities, is likely to orient ‘knowledge workers’ on the peripheries of the academic ‘metropole’ towards a dependency on the ‘techniques’ of the dominant elites. These techniques include academic writing practices that favour norms shown to be unjust and exclusionary (Lillis & Curry, 2010a; Politzer-Ahles et al., 2016), such as publication bias (Politzer-Ahles et al., 2020).

When grammatical and linguistic norms, including disparate notions of what counts as ‘accurate’, become the focus of rule-learning, controversies further ignite around *which* standards and *whose* standards of ‘good’ English and writing are being privileged. Turner has compared controversies about what counts as ‘good writing’, an elusive quality that she calls ‘writtenness’ to the controversy of what counts as good pronunciation. But, unlike research on how accent and pronunciation are used to discriminate between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ spoken English

(Donnelly et al., 2019; Orelus, 2017), the socio-politics of *writtenness* have not received the same attention (Turner, 2018, p. 7):

Writtenness is a cultural ideal, whose values are implicit rather than explicitly espoused. Indexed by evaluative tropes such as ‘polished prose’ ... and assumptions of precision, accuracy and stylistic elegance, it is saturated with ideological and cultural value. As such, it is similar to the position of RP (received pronunciation) in spoken language. However, unlike RP, whose ideological resonance has been extensively commented upon in sociolinguistics ..., the ideologies, social identifications and linguistic assumptions of written language have generated much less concern.

Deficit models signal that the knowledge which students bring with them is inadequate and needs to be replaced with the ‘correct’ conventions and rules so that the learner can be ‘socialized’ into their academic community (Lea & Street, 1998). Since the ‘overall aim of an EAP course is to help students towards membership of their chosen academic community’ (Alexander et al., 2008, p. 80), the assumption prevails that students are ‘empty vessels’ needing to be filled and becomes so normalized that it is hard to conceive how else it could be. This assumption, however, is fundamentally flawed, profoundly political and insidiously ideological. It signals troubling power asymmetries that sit uncomfortably with a participatory, emancipatory, democratic and dialogic progressive education. This has been shown by many, not least by Paulo Freire (2000), whose opposition to a ‘banking model’ of education captures the colonial ethical and educational agendas underlying deficit models. Whilst deficit approaches go largely unquestioned by most academic writing tutors, textbook writers and service providers, including the EAP sector, there are at least three reasons to challenge it.

Firstly, in a complex global (super)diverse higher educational context, diversity, not homogeneity, is the norm (Blommaert, 2013; Blommaert & Horner, 2017). Diversity is already manifest in the existing varieties of English academic discourse (such as blogs and reflective and graphic essays), in disciplinary diversity and in the multilingualism and multiculturalism that are already established in the academic landscape (Canagarajah, 2011). What are students being ‘socialized into’ if not a diverse but also mobile academic landscape? Yet, since academic writing instruction rarely exposes future generations of students to the broader academic writing landscape, it is unlikely that diversity can thrive if academic writing practices continue to converge towards a monomodal, monolingual and monocultural standard (Canagarajah,

2002a, 2013b, 2013c; Lillis & Curry, 2010a; Vertovec, 2007). Secondly, diversity provides higher education with opportunities rather than constraints in so far as it allows the academy to shift from a 'difference-as-deficit' model to a 'difference-as-resource' *consciousness* (Cox, 2014). This shift ensures students can bring their multiliteracies and identities to the classroom and create new ways of thinking, writing and representing knowledge (Thesen & Cooper, 2013). And thirdly, voice, originality and criticality – other qualities that contribute to the 'writtenness' of good academic writing – are less likely to emerge when students' agencies are being corrected and 'socialized', with the intention of conforming to norms that are themselves also changing (Williams, 2017).

Deficit models have negative educational and academic repercussions because they risk eclipsing creativity (Robinson, 2001) and dismissing prior knowledge and experience, which a so-called 'progressive' education is said to value (Russell, 2002). In his seminal book *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*, associated with progressive and secular instruction (as opposed to authoritarian and religious), John Dewey defines education as 'the reconstruction or reorganisation of experience which adds to the meaning of experience and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience' (Dewey, 1938, p. 76). If EAP and similar academic writing providers are genuinely committed to their higher educational ambition of helping students 'understand their disciplines and ... successfully navigate their learning' (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002, p. 1), then, based on a Deweyan understanding of education, they would need to foreground the experiences students bring with them, including their past and present literacies, at least as much as they foreground their mission to 'socialize' students into existing university practices. When academic writing instruction focuses entirely on socializing writers into existing writing conventions, it is training students to produce academic scripts (*écriture*) rather than educating them to write (*écrire*) academically and become writers. In this sense, student writers become de-humanized. Indeed, Dewey argues that training is the proper term for describing what we ask of (non-human) animals. Education, on the other hand, is what is proper to human beings. Training is the blind response to a *stimulus*, whereas education involves mental acts that respond to *meanings*. Training is 'less intellectual or educative' and can be understood as follows (1938, pp. 64–5):

The more specialized the reaction, the less is the skill acquired in practising and perfecting it transferable to other modes of behaviour. According to the orthodox theory of formal discipline, a pupil in studying his [sic] spelling lesson

acquires, besides ability to spell those particular words, an increase of power of observation, attention and recollection which may be employed whenever these powers are needed. As a matter of fact, the more he confines himself to noticing and fixating the forms of words, irrespective of connection with other things (such as the meaning of the words, the context in which they are habitually used, the derivation and the classification of the verbal form, etc.) the less likely he is to acquire the ability which can be used for anything *except* the mere noting of verbal visual forms.

If we apply Dewey's reasoning to EAP, then when we over-specialize and focus on forms and conventions, we are training students rather than educating them. By *training* to write academically, we may be limiting students' ability to notice and make broader connections, such as how words that fall outside of academic word lists are used and how those that fall within it are not. The dangers of foregrounding routines and skills in discussions about education are that these lead to 'ineptitude' rather than understanding meanings and making connections (Dewey, 1938, p. 78):

Routine action, action which is automatic, may increase skill to do a particular thing. In so far, it might be said to have an educative effect. But it does not lead to new perceptions of bearings and connections; it limits rather than widens the meaning horizon. And since the environment changes and our way of acting has to be modified in order to successfully keep a balanced connection with things, an isolated uniform way of acting becomes disastrous at some critical moment. The vaunted "skill" turns out to be gross ineptitude.

If academic writing instruction were as intent on educating *about* writing, i.e. explaining the diversity and mobility of writing genres and practices, as it is on teaching *how* to write some forms of writing at the expense of others, then it might avoid mechanistic 'routine actions that limit' the meaning-making potential that emerges from engaging with a far broader range of academic texts.

Some may argue that this is an unfair characterization of EAP, in particular. However, it is one that reflects the observations I have made throughout my thirty-year teaching and examining experience and one that seems to be shared by writing scholars such as Hyland (2016) and Jenkins (2016), both of whom have identified a mismatch between what EAP might be preaching in its scholarly publications and what it is actually teaching in its classrooms. For example, although some literatures claim that a wide range of academic genres are being taught by EAP practitioners, they also single out the academic essay as being the most prevailing (Nesi & Gardner 2012). This has likely compounded

EAP's privileging of developing a skill in 'a particular thing', namely the academic essay, over and above other genres. That Nesi and Gardner have also claimed that they are offering templates (2012, p. 2) for teachers to follow further betrays compliance with EAP's standardizing, rather than transforming, function within the university. By ignoring socio-semiotic and multimodal research on literacy development, for example, which approaches writing instruction as part of a complex educational ecology that cares about and integrates students' previous and current literacies into the acquisition of new ones (see, for example, Wardle (2017), Williams (2017) and Parnell (2012)), EAP projects itself as a perpetrator of functional transferable skills continually aimed at future 'target situations' (Ding & Bruce, 2017, p. 97):

The notion of the gap between the present situation analysis (where students are now) and the target situation analysis – what students are required to know in the future in terms of academic language knowledge and skills – is an important concept that drives much of EAP and strongly influences pedagogy. Therefore, pedagogic goals in EAP tend to centre on the types of conventionalised communication – spoken and written – that students must process and master in university contexts.

That past and present literacies are so absent from the academic writing classroom is somewhat surprising because nurturing present literacies does not prevent future ones from emerging. On the contrary, valuing and harnessing the literacies students bring with them are more likely to nurture reflective dispositions that allow learners to make sense of new and diverse academic writing contexts. Since it is the students who will be inhabiting their own future 'target situations' long after their teachers and since their teachers can't know what these future target situations will require, students' future needs and capabilities (Robeyns, 2016) might be better 'served' by seeing past and previous literacies as conducive to learning and not as 'interference' (Bennett, 2010). This understanding of the writer-learner who *brings* experience in order to make sense of the future is echoed in Dewey (1938, p. 56):

It is not a question of whether education should prepare for the future. If education is growth, it must progressively realise present possibilities and thus make individuals better fitted to cope with later requirements.

Ignoring the literacies, experiences, capabilities and agencies of individual writers fundamentally ignores what King (2010), arguing from a critical realist and humanist perspective, calls the 'dignity of the self' and what EAP scholar Bee Bond refers to throughout her book on *Making Language Visible in the*

University (2020) as the ‘human’ dimension of a university education. De-humanizing students is a matter of great ethical concern and one that signals uncomfortable truths about the fairness and purpose of EAP practices overall, which include writing instruction. EAP is seen as a commercial sector whose imperative is to generate income by teaching transferable skills rather than to educate. This explains why it has been described in somewhat benign terms as a butler and a handmaiden, and in more pernicious ways as a ‘cash-cow’ (Ding, 2016) because of the way international students, in particular, are referred to behind closed boardroom doors. The unethical implications of this have not gone unnoticed by the media (Matthews, 2014):

Global neoliberal trends ‘... have had astonishing success in creating markets for things whose commodification was once almost unimaginable: drinking water, body parts and social welfare among them’ (Connell, 2013, p. 100). It is within this broader economic and political climate that the specifics of EAP commodification have attracted the attention of and also generated debate in the media by raising concerns around the ethics of taking money from foreign students who already pay significant amounts for their British degrees.

A systematic review of the unethical underpinnings of internationalisation can be found in Mulvey (2021). It seems urgent, therefore, to wonder what impact the commodification of EAP, discussed at length in Ding and Bruce (2017) and Hadley (2015), may also be having on the ethics of writing instruction. The assumption that all students wish to and should learn a standardized version of academic writing to the exclusion of all others seems unfair given the diversity of the student population. This population includes mature students who, for a range of reasons, may be unaccustomed to traditional academic writing and for whom traditional academic writing may even be obsolete (Grove, 2016); students who choose to or are expected to write creatively within the social sciences (Phillips & Kara, 2021) and to write multimodally (Palmeri, 2012); students with a range of abilities and backgrounds (Sperlinger et al., 2018); academic writers who communicate, or who might want to communicate and publish in English as a *lingua franca*; and students obliged to endure the high costs of learning a particular variety of English, which is arguably neither predictive of how students will cope with the language requirements of university study (Coleman et al., 2003) or a reliable indicator of linguistic competence (Leung et al., 2016), nor is it a measure of ‘good’ writing: indeed, Turner has pointed out that students who fail language proficiency tests, such as IELTS and, by implication, EAP courses that mimic the IELTS format, may be and go on to become able academic writers.

Yet, 'such students are being denied the opportunity to develop their academic writing, as well as their studies' (Turner 2018, p. 134) when they do not pass these courses. Entry exams such as IELTS and EAP, including the burgeoning textbook industry that supports them, are not only expensive but there is an increasing sense in which they are ineffective and exclusionary, too. This fuels the perception that they are socially unjust.

I close this chapter on reductive approaches to academic writing – whereby what makes writing academic is reduced to a finite set of transient skills – by raising one final, but no less troubling implication of standardizing academic writing in this way. Related to the ethical concerns decried above are the profits and injustices generated by profit-making essay writing services known as 'essay mills' and 'ghostwriters'. This phenomenon deserves a book in its own right, so, for now, I refer my reader to the growing debate and body of research on this phenomenon (Peters et al., 2021) whilst confining my own contribution to the following brief remarks. Writing templates, grammatical rules and conventions, standard phrases and genres, the outsourcing of writing instruction to 'service providers', such as EAP and Library Services – all the things that are associated with a skills-based approach to academic writing – can be replicated and reproduced, copied and sold, downloaded and programmed algorithmically (Collins, 2019; Introna, 2106). They can even be generated by computers as full-blown fakes that enter citation networks (known as 'farms') (Labbé & Labbé, 2012; Van Noorden, 2014). Standardization is both a cause and an effect of what Macfarlane (2021b) calls 'performativity',⁵ whereby academic writers are taught to perform and display behaviours, including writing behaviours, that comply to the norm. This performativity includes forms of 'soft plagiarism' that are the result of 'symbolic citations' of scholarship that writers have never read and which lead to 'uncritical valorisations' of theories that are not understood. The use of essay mills (Aitchison, 2017; Medway et al., 2018; Peters, 2018) and the occurrence of academic writing hoaxes (Alvesson et al., 2017; Cuthbert, 2018) are symptoms of an academic writing culture that readily relies on the surface features of a genre in order to deem that a text is *bona fide* academic. I discuss hoaxes further in Chapters 3 and 4, but for now, my intention is to signal an ethics of academic misconduct that all too frequently places the moral burden on the student rather than on performative university practices that contribute

⁵ The term 'performativity' has been used by scholars from a range of disciplines spanning critical theory, education and philosophy to mean a range of practices. In this book, I refer to 2 of its meanings: the first is as Macfarlane intends it to describe the hollowness and superficiality of academic writing forms. The second is as Lunsford (2015) intends it (see Chapter 3) to describe what academic writing can do and has positive connotations of action and agency.

to the conditions for misconduct (Molinari, 2014). One of the troubles with having a standardized, transient and reductive academic writing culture which also belongs to an increasingly commodified higher education sector is that writing is easily and readily monetized, plagiarized and disembodied from the humans who created it.

Conclusions

In troubling the way that academic writing is understood, taught and assessed by university programmes, such as EAP, my intention has been to foreground the predilection by writing service providers, including EAP, of reductive and standardized writing ontologies. These include the skills needed to produce a particular version of academic writing, one that is 'objective' and 'impersonal', monomodal, monolingual, and monocultural. Such reductive approaches have undesirable aesthetic, social and ethical implications, which include the denial a writer's humanity. The next chapter highlights some of the historical reasons that have led to the privileging of this version of academic writing and offers glimpses of how else it could be.