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Signing Off

So, where does all this leave us?

Before I answer this, let me first summarise the gist of these five chapters.

The Gist

Set in the context of twenty-first-century neoliberal educational practices and commodification, I have argued that what makes writing academic are its emerging SAPs, not the unhinged will of the writer or the decontextualized rules and surface features of the textual environment. Having framed academic writing in the tradition of EAP and American Composition Studies, both of which are influential in shaping academic writing discourses and have spawned a highly lucrative textbook industry, I endorsed the view that academic writing is a social practice that has a history and is therefore contingent. This contingency implies that it can be different to how it is conventionally portrayed by EAP and other study skill approaches to academic writing.

The Detail

Reductive approaches to writing have undesirable aesthetic, socio-cultural and ethical implications, including the denial of a writer's humanity, understood in terms of the literacies, backgrounds and range of knowledge repertoires that they (could) bring to their academic texts. Specifically, I have challenged the histories that conflate writing with the alphabet and with higher-order thinking, arguing instead that writing did not have to be conflated with the alphabet and that although it has been, this does not mean that alphabetic cultures are better at thinking than oral or visual cultures. I have also highlighted that within academic

writing cultures there is a thriving diversity of genres, yet modern-day standards of English academic writing seem to have evolved from and reified only one, the experimental article. Cherry-picking the histories that have colluded with the idea that writing raises consciousness and that academic writing is ‘objective’ amounts to an ideological stance, and ontological complicity, that leads to unjust practices, such as the exclusion of knowledge that is not presented ‘objectively’ in alphabetically written forms. Moreover, reductive approaches that reify a particular paradigm of academic writing – the alphabetic and ‘encapsulated’ one that reduces writing to specific terminologies and genres – allow hoaxes and IELTS essays to count as academic. These are not academic because they transgress the values of academic integrity – such as a commitment to the truth – which is an emergent SAP. Rather, what makes writing academic are the ways in which writers knowledgeably interact with their textual environments to allow SAPs to emerge. These environments include threshold concepts that trouble and re-configure what we think makes writing academic. In considering the role that argument also plays in our understandings of what makes writing academic, I claimed that whilst arguments can make writing academic, there is no requirement for them to be propositional (i.e. linguistic) or logical because most academic arguments are substantive and inductive. Because of this non-reductive nature, argument, too, can be considered as a socio-academic practice SAPs that emerges from the interaction of the writer with their textual environment.

In Chapter 4, I introduced the philosophy of critical realism as a macro theory to argue that academic writing is a transitive and epistemological method of enquiry that belongs to the realm of empirical reality. This makes it as (in) fallible as any other method of enquiry that is essentially a proxy for reality because it is not reality itself. This commits us to the conclusion that academic writing can never be ‘objective’ because it is a method of *human* enquiry and representation and is, therefore, by definition, always subjective. This is why I have also located the writer within the realm of the empirical alongside their various other methods of enquiry. This level of reality is epistemologically real. In other words, it exists, but it can vary, in the sense that writers have relative freedoms to choose their methods of enquiry, have different values, skills and abilities, and diverse worldviews (ideologies).

The specific genres that are in circulation at the level of the ACTUAL, such as traditional genres and those discussed in Chapter 3, are also epistemologically real because they are the result of human agents who have chosen to make them manifest by bringing them in, so to speak, from the infinite pool of genres

available in the textual environment (REAL). The level of the ACTUAL contains the texts that actually exist in academia and that have to varying degrees been sanctioned as 'academic'. For example, Sousanis, Carson and Harron all received their doctorates, despite them having been drawn, rapped and written for three different audiences. These, despite being wildly different in their forms, are considered to be academic not in virtue of their surface features but in virtue of their compliance with the deep institutional requirements at the structural level of the textual environment, which is ontologically REAL. By contrast, the level of the EMPIRICAL is epistemologically real because it is a transitive level of reality, one that can change according to the choices of the agent.

Where change is much slower and even impossible is at the level of the REAL. This is the ontological level of reality. In critical realism, this is the level of deep structures, ones that are historical, institutionally embedded and entangled in the deep-seated disciplinary traditions of academic institutions. It includes institutional practices that no amount of agency can change, such as the need to do research in order to be awarded a PhD or the fact that language and the alphabet are here to stay.

The three realms of reality – the REAL, the ACTUAL and the EMPIRICAL – form an open system. In virtue of being porous and permeable, meaning that new knowledge can 'filter through' at each level, opportunities for change become possible at the level of the ACTUAL. This requires agents to identify those opportunities for change, which I have referred to as 'levers' and 'cracks', following Mason and Street. In order for agents to identify and action these levers, they must exert their rational judgement and have deep knowledge of the level of the REAL because they need to know what is available at the ontological level in order to introduce meaningful change at the epistemological level. For academic writers and their teachers to become agents of change in both their own practices and in re-configuring what makes writing academic, new pedagogies need to emerge. The foundations of such pedagogies require writers and teachers to have agency to be able to lay them. I have identified two key levers that can help activate this agency: scholarship and pedagogy itself. Scholarship can act as a lever of change because it affords deep knowledge of the structures at the level of the REAL. This knowledge is needed if agents are to engage in transformative practices that allow for change at the level of the ACTUAL to take place. Pedagogy can act as a lever of change because it can provide opportunities for interdisciplinary knowledge, which is knowledge at the level of the REAL, to be the focus of a writing curriculum. Interdisciplinary knowledge enables writers as knowers to create texts that are more likely to

become ‘agents of change’ because they represent the knowledge needed to transform reality at the level of the ACTUAL. In Chapter 5, several examples of pedagogies that engage students with this kind of deep learning were given with an indication of how, at the level of the ACTUAL, each pedagogy has the potential to bring about change that is socially just: twelve reasons for change and pedagogic examples were given. I then referred the reader to an ethical pedagogy for international students whereby postgraduate researchers were assessed on their collaborative blog writing rather than on their ability to write an academic essay; and the choice of a memoir for the genre of the doctorate meant that a Cambodian doctoral researcher’s knowledge could emerge in ways that would otherwise not have been possible had she been required to write her thesis for the traditional IMRAD structure, for example.

Overall, I encouraged writers and their teachers to engage with academic writing communities led by writing scholars who generously share their knowledge and resources as part of a collective and collegial project dedicated to helping academic writers flourish.

Where to Next?

Because of its focus on change and its commitment to transformative practices that further the mission of education, which is to be emancipatory and transformative, critical realist theory lends itself to providing a rationale for continuing to transform pedagogies in the interests of ethics and social justice. This is because it theorizes academic writing as an open system – not a straight-jacket, a pigeon hole, a skill, a generic practice, or a subservient ‘handmaiden to the disciplines’, but as a full-blown agent of change. This is powerful. And scary. Open systems are potentially unpredictable and unwieldy: ‘I’ve created a monster,’ comes to mind because the possibilities at the level of the REAL are infinite and those at the level of the ACTUAL are simply the tip of the ice-berg. Critical realism allows us the freedom to imagine what else might be possible at the level of the ACTUAL in a future university, similar to those imagined in Barnett (2012).

Writing understood as a method of enquiry and agent of change is clearly already being enacted at the level of the ACTUAL, as the many doctoral theses referred to indicate. But critical realism is a complex theory and it is perhaps for this reason that it has had such little uptake in academic writing pedagogies. Another reason might be that, as already highlighted, resistance to change is

common for a range of reasons, including ideological ones: transforming academic writing practices means relinquishing some of our deeply held beliefs about professional standards, identities and competencies. In her book *Fields of Play*, Laurel Richardson articulates this resistance well.

Arguing that what makes writing academic are its SAPs has raised as many questions as I hope it has resolved. I leave you with the questions that I would like further research to investigate:

- What are the limitations of critical realist theory as a *praxis* for writing in the academy? For example, how and who classifies what belongs to the level of the EMPIRICAL, the ACTUAL and the REAL?
- Who judges the ‘judgmental rationality’ of agents who are invested with the power to trigger the levers of change needed to transform what happens at the level of the ACTUAL? And who ‘invests them’ with this power?
- And, related to the above, what are the generative mechanisms of the transitive epistemological realities of the REAL and the ACTUAL, i.e. can change ever occur at the intransitive ontological level of the REAL? For example, what are the levers that might change existing threshold concepts or technologies or institutional practices? How and who could trigger these levers? Roy Bhaskar’s alethic version of the truth might hold the key to this as it is an attempt to bridge the objective truth at the level of the REAL and the subjective interpretivist truth at the level of the ACTUAL (Groff, 2000);
- What new SAPs (Socio-Academic Practices), EVs (Epistemic Virtues) and TCs (Threshold Concepts) might emerge from the open system that academic writing is, especially with regard to the epistemologies of the South, but also to other epistemologies, such as technological and algorithmic ones (Introna, 2016)?
- What, if any, pedagogical differentiations might be needed at undergraduate, Master’s and doctoral levels with regard to choice of genres at the ACTUAL level? For example, are the possibilities at the level of the ACTUAL suitable for all levels of knowledge communication?
- What, if any, disciplinary differentiations are needed with regard to choice of genres at the ACTUAL level? For example, could a scientist write a memoir to explain scientific theories?
- And, finally, what might be the constraints on what makes writing academic? Would these all be at the level of the REAL, as I seem to have implied, or are there constraints at the level of the ACTUAL and EMPIRICAL?

These questions are the beginnings of new conversations that I hope to be part of.

Thank you for reading me,
Julia