CHAPTER 7
THINKING CREATIVELY ABOUT RESEARCH WRITING

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Writing is an essential requirement of any graduate student's programme. Over the course of their graduate career a student will write hundreds of pages, much of it for assessment purposes, and will be expected to do so in complex ways. Yet, in spite of the centrality of writing to their academic success, formal instruction is often uncommon. At many universities in Canada, in many cases, the only explicit writing instruction graduate students will have received by the time they complete their programme is a requisite undergraduate English Literature course, possibly an English Second Language class for international students, and perhaps a visit with a peer-tutor at an overworked writing centre. For the most part, learning to write academically takes place, or is expected to take place, implicitly. However, in a context where language, genre, and stylistic conventions are governed by disciplinary norms that are constituted by competing and conflicting discourses, implicit learning becomes problematic. What counts as evidence, for example, will be different in philosophy and anthropology. Many of the conventions and norms of academic writing are subtle even for experienced writers, yet students are expected to learn and practice them without explicit instruction (Sharon Parry, 1998). From an academic literacies approach, we argue that academic writing is a social practice constituted by prevailing ideologies (Theresa Lillis & Mary Scott, 2007), rather than a transparent generic skill.

The purpose of this pedagogic intervention was to offer an intensive co-curricular, multi-day (7) workshop to graduate students on "thinking creatively about research." The workshop was developed from an academic literacies perspective and had a central focus of explicit pedagogy. Memorial University is the only university in Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada and has some 17,000 students enrolled annually. The university is situated in St John's on the remote island of Newfoundland. There are few opportunities for graduate academic development and our team proposed "thinking creatively about research" to introduce a more collegial and interactive approach to research writing than was currently being experienced. We conceptualized "creatively" as different, new, and innovative.

We applied for and received funding to pilot the workshop in two faculties. We then invited a volunteer cohort of students from Memorial University's Graduate Program in Humanities and the Faculty of Arts in Fall 2011 (nine participants) and a second offering occurred in Winter 2012 with graduate students from the Faculty of Engineering and Applied Science (13 participants). In this chapter, we focus on the Arts cohort. The majority of those who attended were international students from Eastern Europe, China and South America, others were from mainland Canada and only a few were local. All the students attended the workshop voluntarily in addition to their regular coursework and teaching duties. Students in the Arts cohort came from Philosophy, Anthropology, Music, and the inter-disciplinary graduate programme. The evaluation of the intervention was framed by one overarching question: Did students find the pedagogy to be transformative and empowering in their approach to research writing? (For overview of workshop schedule, see Table 7.1.)

TRANSFORMATIVE PEDAGOGIES

Antonio Gramsci (1971), Michel Foucault (1995) and Paulo Freire (1986) have all argued that certain ways of thinking and doing become dominant over time, and begin to appear as natural parts of our taken-for-granted world. Transformative education, which challenges the normalizing forces inherent in most education, has two complementary components. First, it allows the individual to learn new ways of "seeing" the world, and to act upon that. Second, it makes visible the tension created between living within the system but thinking outside it; from contending with issues on a daily basis while, at the same time, moving incrementally towards something new (Peter Mayo, 1999).

Like other practices in academic environments, writing is shaped by accepted "norms" of particular disciplinary discourses. There are rules that govern how to cite, what to cite, what questions to ask, and what constitutes an acceptable answer (Robin Lakoff, 1990). Lakoff (1990) further argues that academic language is oblique and implicitly understood practices maintain the exclusivity and authority of the discourse, distinguishing those who understand discourse conventions from "others" who do not. Writing assessment practices that require students to reproduce the "voice" of the discourse in their writing often "militate against creativity and individuality" (Liz Cain & Ian Pople, 2011, p. 49). Rather than exploring innovation in their research and writing, students find themselves trying to act as ventriloquists for their disciplines (Amanda Fulford, 2009).

Dealing with this problem from an academic literacies perspective, this project uses a pedagogy of explicit instruction, and non-traditional approaches to research writing in an attempt to open students' eyes to their positions and roles within their respective disciplinary discourses, and provide them with a range of techniques and

perspectives to allow them to engage the tension of living inside the system but thinking outside it.

THE WORKSHOPS

The 7-morning workshop was based on a curriculum developed at a South African university in a context of transformation and change in higher education. The curriculum was encapsulated in a book (Cecile Badenhorst, 2007); the workshops for the Faculty of Arts cohort were adapted from this source. The workshop takes a participant—who has already started their graduate research and has collected data or achieved some results from this research—through the process of research writing from conceptualization to final draft. There are two parts to the workshop to simulate two stages in the writing process: *composition* (Part 1: four consecutive mornings) and *revision* (Part 2: three consecutive mornings) with homework assigned after each morning's workshop. Between the two parts, participants had a month to write the first draft of their chosen research project. While we emphasized the iterative and recursive nature of writing, we found the two part structure useful for focusing on specific issues. Three key questions informed the design of the pedagogy and shaped the activities and materials:

1. What does the writer need to know about academic and research discourses?
2. What does the writer need to know about writing and creativity?
3. What does the writer need to understand about him/herself as an academic researcher/writer?

These questions guided the content, materials and activities. The pedagogy was experiential (David Kolb, 1984). Participants were given *information* often in the form of examples, research articles, and theories to deconstruct; they then had to *apply* what they had learned; they *reflected* individually and in groups; then they extracted key learning points and *reapplied* this in new learning situations. The curriculum was continuously spiralling and hermeneutical. For example, an issue such as "extracting a focus from the complexity of their research topics" was introduced in the morning, participants would complete an activity on it in class, they would read their activity to the group and the group would give feedback. The students then applied that activity to their research in the homework activities. That homework was debriefed in groups the following morning and learning was mediated again by the facilitator after the group work. The following day's activities built on the previous day's ones. All activities contained scaffolding—mini-activities that built on one another—to cultivate participant confidence: developing a safe environment was an important element, as were group work and dialogue.

Each workshop morning was divided into three sections (see Table 7.1). In Part 1, through dialogue, activities, and handouts (research articles, samples of research writing) participants each day discussed issues such as academic discourses (e.g., what counts as evidence in different disciplines, how arguments work, research writing genres and so on) and they were taken through theories on writing (e.g., writing as a process, what goes into writing, why writing is so difficult, how self-criticism can paralyze a writer, how academic writing is situated in a discourse of criticism and what constitutes a writing identity). Although we provided information on current research in this area, for example, work on disciplinarity by Ken Hyland (2008), our purpose was not to present "best practices" or solutions but rather to allow participants to develop an understanding of the epistemological nature of academic writing and to allow them to decide how they would write from the range of choices we presented. The final part of the day was devoted to "play." Play was important to the pedagogy because it encouraged participants to move out of their usual ways of writing and thinking. The play activities used concept mapping, free-writing and sketching to revise sections or thinking in their drafts and involved activities to do with developing authority in writing, seeing research from

Table 7.1: Thinking creatively about research—workshop structure

Part 1:	**Day One**	**Day Two**	**Day Three**	**Day Four**
Half hour	Introduction	Group work	Group work	Group work
One hour	Issues in research writing	Issues in research writing	Issues in research writing	Issues in research writing
Half hour	Theories of writing and creativity	Theories of writing and creativity	Theories of writing and creativity	Pushing the boundaries with language, words and writing
One hour	Pushing the boundaries with language, words and writing	Pushing the boundaries with language, words and writing	Pushing the boundaries with language, words and writing	Concluding activities

There was a break between Part 1 and 2 of approximately a month. Participants were expected to write a draft of their chosen research project during this time.

Part 2:	**Day Five**	**Day Six**	**Day Seven**
Half hour	Introduction	Group work	Group work
One hour	Creative Revision 1	Creative Revision 2	Creative Revision 3
Half hour	Feedback	Dealing with criticism	Writing strategies
One hour	Revision activities	Revision activities	Revision activities and conclusion

different points of view, trying out different voices, thinking about representation in the research (who we are representing, how and why). An example of "play" activity was to free-write about the research from the subject's point of view (e.g., the participant, the organization, the document) or to sketch a research project as if it were on a stage in a theatre

Part 2 followed the same pedagogy and emphasis on play. The focus in this section was on revision, structure and coherence, and the discourses around producing a finished product in a particular discipline. We also engaged with the emotional aspects of writing such as dealing with criticism, how to give and get feedback and what to do with feedback.

STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES

While there is much that can be said about these workshops, the participants and the pedagogy, we have chosen to focus on how explicit instruction and play lead to transformative learning since we feel these were catalyst elements.

Explicit Instruction

Explicit instruction is most often used to make the invisibility of assessment more visible in education but as Sally Mitchell (2010) has argued the intentions of transparency are not always seen in the outcomes. Making assessment criteria clear can lead to a compliance attitude where the student focuses on the criteria and not on the learning task. This workshop was not assessed and we felt that explicit instruction—essentially a meta-instruction about activities—would promote dialogue and discussion. For example, when we proposed an activity, we asked students: Why have we included this activity? Why do we need to know this? We were explicit about the nature of academic discourses, about the pedagogy and about what we asked them to do. We provided no answers or solutions (since there are none) but allowed students to find their way through dialogue. For many students, their intuitive writing practices were at odds with the way they thought they ought to write as academics. The explicit instruction highlighted the epistemological nature of writing and how it is tied to particular perceptions of knowledge, some of which are privileged in university contexts. This allowed participants to see that there was no "wrong" way to write but rather there were choices about whether to conform, how much to conform or if to conform at all. Rather than "fixing" writing that was "weak" or "poor," we emphasized understanding their particular discourse/audience requirements and then making decisions based on their own epistemologies and power base. The following student comments, written during the workshop, illustrate a growing awareness of their own writing. These direct quotes from workshop participants are included with permission. All names have been changed:

> This class is interesting because it helps me to realize the way I write is not wrong. (Charlie, 5)

> I learned a fair deal about the writing process … which was a pleasant surprise. (Ernest, 5)

We also emphasized that they could make choices about *what* they wrote about. This is where they could be innovative, creative and original. For many students, it was a relief to feel that there was a choice after years of being squeezed into a mould and not being allowed to do things differently:

> Yesterday's workshop was interesting to me because things started coming to me quicker than they usually do. At one point during our exercises I stopped thinking about what I was going to say about myself and my research and just wrote. I think I'm getting to a more honest place regarding where I'm at. (Veronica, 9)

We discussed the consequences of challenging disciplinary ways of writing, why one would want to do that and what the alternatives were. We related these discussions to their position in the discourse, and their roles in the university. We particularly focused on their identity as researchers and writers and how research writing was tied into developing an identity as a researcher/writer (Frances Kelly, Marcia Russell & Lee Wallace, 2011). We asked them to free-write about their identity, to sketch themselves in relation to their research and to constantly reflect on themselves, their research topic and their goals with this research project. The following comments indicate a re-connection with themselves as researchers:

> In my research and writing I have noticed that it is getting easier to focus on what I am looking for and what I want to say. I think I am going to start getting up early to do a little sketching in the morning so that I can give my mind a chance to warm up before I tackle things like Heidegger or Kant or God knows who else. (Veronica, 12)

> It's not that I discovered a magic formula to get rid of my academic obligations. But I realized I can commit to what I want to do, find my way and do it. I find that the … discussions really help. (Jaromil, 11)

The Importance of Play

Play was a central component of the pedagogy for two reasons. First, the element of play allowed participants to move out of their usual way of writing and

thinking; and second, we wanted students to have "flow" experiences while writing. "Flow," argues psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990), is an optimal experience that happens when people experience feelings of intense concentration and deep enjoyment. For the play activities we used metaphor, "illogical" questions about their research, concept mapping (Tony Buzan & Barry Buzan, 2006), free writing (Peter Elbow, 1973) and sketching (Yeoryia Manolopoulou, 2005). Participants enjoyed the coloured blank paper and coloured felt markers they were given to work with. We explained to participants that like the Billy Collins poem "Introduction to poetry" (Collins, 1996; also available at http://..loc.gov/poetry/180/001.html), we wanted them to drop a mouse in their research and see which way it ran, or to hold their research up to the light like a prism and watch the colors changing. We did not want them to tie their research in a chair and torture the truth out of it. Although sceptical and hesitant at first, students soon embraced "play" enthusiastically. They found that play allowed them to focus on ideas rather than rules and conventions. New and novel ways of looking at their research made them feel unique and showed them that they had something worthwhile to say, as these quotes illustrate:

> Some of the activities opened my eyes to the potential of creativity in [academic] writing that I had not thought possible. (Tip, 5)

> I thought about the problem [in] my problem statement, trying to pinpoint something out of several problems. We played with words and images, which was a fun way to deal with the task on hand. I don't know if these words and images are going to guide me toward clearer words or statements or even clearer ideas but they're there. (Sasha, 9)

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

It is difficult to assess if an intervention results in transformation and we would not want to claim that a series of seven morning workshops over two months could generate such results. The process of transformative learning is often difficult to measure because it includes complex experiences that involve "cognitive questioning, invested deliberation, contradictions, new possibilities, risk-taking, and resolution" (Kathleen King, 2005, p. 92). It also includes developing confidence and self-efficacy in a particular domain. Our key evaluative tool was the students themselves and the writing they produced. We found that participants did leave the workshop with a new sense of themselves and their position within the system in which they worked. Our aim was not to change their epistemologies, but to open them to their own ontological and epistemolog-

ical claims in their research and the epistemologies inherent in the writing tasks they were asked to do on a daily basis (Badenhorst, 2008). Participants discussed the myriad components of research such as conceptualizing research, designing a research project, developing a methodology, collecting data, analyzing data, synthesizing results and evaluating research contributions—not as generic concepts—rather as conceptions of what constitutes knowledge and what knowledge is valued. They recognized the tension of working inside the system while thinking outside it—but that the choice of action was their decision. The following quotes indicate this growing awareness:

> The workshop helped me to see where I stand in relation to my thesis. (Kei, 11)

> What surprised me the most about my writing during the break [the break between the two parts of the workshop] was how stable it felt. I wrote a little almost every day and it developed into something good and less stressful even though there were still some things I hadn't figured out. (Veronica, 37)

> What surprised me was that I actually understood what was going on, rather than writing in a lost way. (Farah, 38)

We discussed disciplinary norms regarding citations, evidence, authority and expectations regarding graduate writing. Towards the end of the workshop, this is what students articulated about the practical application of writing within a discipline:

> I was surprised at the very useful conceptual map (very colourful), which was the base of a successful and productive meeting with my supervisor. (Jaromil, 5)

> My supervisor has noted that I am beginning to write with more clarity or at least it is the best quality I have produced after two years. (Evals, 2)

> I realized my methodology, my area of inquiry [was] arts-based research. This has changed completely my understanding of what I would do if I continue [with] a PhD (Evals, 8)

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, our aim was to explore how the pedagogic intervention manifested in practical changes and to understand the choices participants made in relation to their disciplinary writing and perhaps even to see how this extended even further

to other actors in the institution, such as research supervisors. To this end we are conducting in-depth interviews with students who participated in the workshops. This chapter's focus centred on the pedagogic intervention, particularly the elements of explicit instruction and play. The most interesting conclusion we drew from the intervention was the difficulty students faced when we could not provide them with a right or wrong answer to an activity. Used to being rule-bound, participants found themselves faced with unending possibilities. This same difficulty became their opening to innovation, enjoyment and insight. Rules were not abolished but revealed. The purpose of revealing the rules was not only to enable students to succeed but to allow them to make choices about how they wanted to succeed. The explicit instruction did not focus only on "best practice" or templates of conventions but on opening up critical dialogue and complex questioning about research and writing in disciplinary discourses. Through dialogue, intense writing and play, participants began to experience change in their approach to writing, the way they saw themselves as writers and their perceptions of writing research. While we cannot unreservedly label this "transformational," this research indicates that students did experience incremental movements towards something new. The following comment indicates the elusive nature of this change:

> I've barely had time to think over the past four days, and haven't really had time to do the [workshop] homework due to a lot of other obligations, yet when I finally got home from campus last night at 11p.m. and sat down to relax for a minute, I felt compelled to write, and not with any intent in mind or for any academic purpose and what came out was a kind of problem narrative of what I'm working on in a way I had never remotely conceived of before. (Neville, 11)

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