

## CHAPTER 1.

# ACADEMIC WRITING INSTRUCTION IN AUSTRALIAN TERTIARY EDUCATION: THE EARLY YEARS

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This chapter arises out of a historical review of the literature of the first decade of tertiary writing instruction in Australia, the nineteen eighties (for a fuller discussion, see Chanock, 2011a, 2011b).<sup>1</sup> In that study, I sought to discover how the people who shaped the early development of writing instruction understood their role and the difficulties experienced by their students, and what sort of practice they developed to address these. To this end, I read every publication in this field that I could obtain from the eighties, often in the form of non-refereed conference papers. I looked at how the conversation flowed and eddied, the points of convergence and divergence, and the social-professional constellations involved in academic language and learning.

What emerged was a picture in many ways like our present situation in Australia, which will resonate, I think, with readers in the United Kingdom and North America. The framing of education for economic productivity requires “wider participation” in higher education (Bradley, 2008; Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1990; Nelson, 2003; UK National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education, 1997), and this planned expansion has intensified anxiety about students’ (lack of) preparedness for university study (e.g., Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA), 2000). Particular cohorts are targeted for remedial instruction, while plans are made to reform whole course curricula to accommodate the development of transferable skills in every graduating student (Bowden, Hart, King, Trigwell, & Watts, 2002; Hager, Holland, & Beckett, 2002; La Trobe University, 2009; for the UK, see Burke, 2002). All of this might seem to afford opportunities for the learning advisers responsible for writing instruction to shape their universities’ responses; it should be instructive, therefore, to look back to an earlier time when similar pressures were felt. What my study suggests, however, is that universities in the eighties largely ignored what their learning advisers knew about supporting students. The literature of that decade manifests

an approach that was intellectually persuasive—with ideas similar to those of the Writing Across the Curriculum movement in the US and to the later “tertiary literacies” approach in the UK (Russell, Lea, Parker, Street, & Donahue, 2009) —but not institutionally powerful. In the larger context of Australian universities’ efforts to improve teaching and learning, little attention has been given, then or now, to the nature of writing, even though it is the medium by which students’ learning is most commonly assessed in many courses. The puzzle of why writing development has received so little institutional attention is the focus of this chapter.

## **AN OVERVIEW**

For most of its thirty-year history, academic writing instruction in Australian colleges and universities has been the responsibility of a small group of specialists in academic language and learning. Initially, conversations around tertiary students’ learning included academic developers, who worked with faculty, as well as learning advisers, who worked with students. As the decade progressed, however, these groups diverged into largely separate communities of practice, owing to differences in their theories, methods, and missions. This split had implications for the teaching of writing, because the group that was better positioned to influence institutional policy around teaching and learning—the academic developers—were not concerned with writing but with students’ “approaches to learning (deep or surface)” more generally. Learning advisers were more inclined to locate the problems of learning in the discourses their students struggled to appropriate. Though tasked with helping students who were thought deficient for reasons of language, culture, or prior educational experience, they came to challenge the institutional view that cultural adjustment was a problem for a minority of (mainly “non-traditional”) students. Instead, they saw all students as confronting unfamiliar cultures of enquiry, and saw their own role as guiding students into the cultures of their disciplines and explicating their discourses. While this enabled them to help students towards often dramatic improvements in their academic writing, the specialised nature of learning advisers’ knowledge about discourse—informed by theories about language, rhetoric(s) and culture(s) —was not easy to communicate beyond the borders of their community of practice.

## **REMEDIAL ORIGINS OF LEARNING SUPPORT**

The institutional division of labour between learning advisers and academic developers in Australia goes back to the circumstances in which their roles were

separately established. Although the challenges of teaching “non-traditional” students are commonly traced to a “massification” of higher education, it is clear from the literature of the nineteen eighties that this assumption belongs to a “myth of transience” (Rose, 1985; Russell, 1991) in Australia as elsewhere. While “massification” is supposed to have begun with the government-mandated amalgamation of vocational and higher education institutions in 1988 (Dawkins, 1998), we find that well before that time, university administrations were concerned about student success and retention (Anderson & Eaton, 1982). Counselling services were founded from the nineteen fifties in response to intractable problems of failure and attrition, and were given responsibility for improving students’ study skills (Quintrell & Robertson, 1995; Stevenson & Kokkinn, 2007). However, as Higher Education research tried and failed to identify deficiencies in particular categories of students, questions began to be asked about teaching as well, and academic development units developed from the late nineteen-sixties (Anderson & Eaton, 1982).

## REFRAMING THE ROLE

While academic skills development in Australia was initially located in counselling services, the work required more specialised knowledge about language, and increasingly learning advisers, many with backgrounds in applied linguistics, were employed to remediate under-preparedness in growing cohorts of tertiary students, and to mediate the problems of non-traditional students in particular. However, many soon reframed their role to provide “initiation, not remediation,” as Beasley (1988, p. 50) put it. They saw themselves as interpreters between the cultures of their students and the cultures of their institutions (Clerehan, 1990). Ballard (1982), working in the Study Skills centre at the Australian National University, wrote,

Australian universities are ... bound within the Western cultural traditions of approaches to knowledge and learning. Academic staff can be as culturally blinkered as any overseas undergraduate, and ... the skill I need here is two-fold: to make explicit for the student the cultural values that are deeply implicit in each academic system, and to interpret for both the students and the academic staff member across this cultural divide. (p. 119)

Advisers identified what these cultural values and assumptions were by close reading of the texts that students were asked to read and write for their disci-

plines, which revealed not only broad differences in national traditions of enquiry, but differences between school and university literacies and between the literacies of different disciplines. And when advisers looked closely at students' use of language, they found that students did not make the same errors consistently, either within an essay or in their writing for different disciplines, and found also that new "expression" problems could appear in later years (Taylor, 1988). This challenged the common view that students were bringing unsuitable dialects to the university, but suggested instead that they had to learn new academic dialects on arrival. Learning advisers also found that students were successful if their work addressed the lecturers' reasons for assigning a question, and used Anglo-western conventions of argument, regardless of whether their actual English usage improved. Ballard (1987) described examples of students' improvement

... which display a similar pattern: academic success in the home culture, failure in the new context of a western university, intervention by an adviser who identified the problem as one of cultural dislocation rather than linguistic incompetence, and thereafter a rapid—sometimes spectacular—re-gaining of competence. (p. 51)

Although the students referred to here were foreign, Ballard went on to point out that domestic students, too, were faced with "cultural dislocation" on entering the university, and that the way her group of colleagues worked with students from overseas was

only a further development of the way we work with our Australian students. With these students too we move as quickly as possible from the initial "My lecturer sent me because of my poor expression" or "This essay is illiterate" to a consideration of the thinking underlying the piece of writing—the terms of the topic, the appropriate questions to be raised, the evidence and methods of analysis particular to the discipline or the course, the most effective organisation and presentation of the whole argument. We are always, in our work, consciously moving the student towards a clearer recognition of the different styles of thinking appropriate to the sub-cultures of the different disciplines he is studying. With overseas students I am only adding a further cultural

dimension—the habits of thought and exposition peculiar to Western academic culture. (Ballard, 1982, p. 127)

Learning advisers, therefore, were often working against the remedial assumptions on which their employment had been based for, as Ballard (1984) found, “instruction in grammar or ideal structures for essays . . . seems to be of marginal value . . . if [students] are approaching their materials in a manner inappropriate to the academic culture of which they are a part” (p. 52). Therefore,

assistance in the fundamental reorientation of intellectual behaviour cannot be achieved in a short preliminary course divorced from academic content; just as with language skills, we have found it can best be achieved through concurrent assistance, in close relation to the actual demands of the student’s course. (Ballard, 1987, p. 117; cf. Buckingham, 1990)

## DIVERGENT PARADIGMS

In this respect, there was a good deal of common ground between learning advisers and academic developers, in that both thought it was time to shift focus from what was wrong with students to look at the curriculum and try to understand the students’ encounter with what they were taught and how they were taught it. The two groups had very different ways, however, of conceptualising this encounter. Academic developers were drawing on a body of theory coming out of Sweden and the UK, based on a phenomenographic method of researching how students experienced their learning of particular subject matters (Marton, Hounsell, & Entwistle, 1984). Phenomenographers identified three contrasting ways in which students approached their studies: surface learning, aimed at giving the examiner what s/he wanted on assessments in order to survive the course; deep learning, aimed at understanding for the students’ own intellectual satisfaction; and instrumental learning, which might use either of these approaches depending on what the student perceived the subject to call for, and which was aimed at optimising grades (Biggs, 1989). At first these approaches were thought to be traits of the individual student, but the theory developed to see them more as responses to the design of subjects, depending on whether students thought a subject was designed to elicit memorisation of facts or understanding of concepts. Out of this theory came the idea of constructive alignment, which is the dominant paradigm today—the idea that teaching

should be designed to encourage understanding, and that intended learning outcomes, learning activities, and assessments should all support deep learning (Biggs, 1996,1999).

Learning advisers did not disagree with any of this; it just seemed obvious to many of them, as far as it went, and also in the view of many it did not go far enough. What they felt was missing was any emphasis on culture, either the differences in the cultures that students came from, or the differences in the cultures of enquiry that they encountered at university. Phenomenography was not about culture, and it is possible to suggest reasons for this. First, it developed initially in Sweden, which is not a very multicultural context, and secondly many of its theorists came from scientific backgrounds. This seems to be reflected in Saljo's (1979) characterisation of "deep learning as 'an interpretative process aimed at understanding reality'" (as cited in Taylor, 1990, p. 56).

The learning advisers' insights had no place in a worldview in which "construction of knowledge" referred solely to a cognitive, not a cultural, operation. In this view, student learning constituted a progression from misconceiving reality to understanding it correctly. In many fields, however, different perspectives can produce different, competing or coexisting interpretations, and Bock (1986) objected that the phenomenographers' definition of "learning as the integration of complex wholes leading to a personal change in the student's conception of reality ... leaves little space for exploring the process through which a student learns to reject, knowingly, in total or part, the conception of reality offered by a particular writer" (Bock, 1986, p. 99). As learning advisers saw it, what students needed to understand was not a single, objectively accessible reality, but the ways that people in different disciplines or intellectual traditions construct their distinctive accounts of reality.

The relevance of this perspective is clear from the few examples offered in the literature. For example, Ballard and Clanchy (1988) had a student who received very high grades in anthropology, but a low grade for an English essay because of the "intrusion, into what should be a literary critical analysis, of anthropological concerns and perspectives," when the student called the gravedigger in Hamlet a "non-aligned source of objective social criticism" (Ballard & Clanchy, 1988, p. 16). After talking with a learning adviser, the student rewrote her essay to focus on how the gravedigger scene functions in the dramatic structure of the play, and her grade improved. This was a very different problem from the one that concerned phenomenographers, that is, whether students aim to understand their reading, or just to reproduce it. This student was reading to understand, but what she wanted to understand was the gravedigger's social role—and indeed, she was making those connections between different ways of

thinking that we claim we want students to make—when all that was appropriate to the discourse was to comment on the way that drama works.

## LOSING THE ARGUMENT

Now, both approaches, whether from learning theory or from discourse, produced insights that could support teaching and learning, but only one of them came to have much influence. Instead of drawing on both, universities have tended to embrace deep and surface learning theory, while culture and language have continued to be seen as problems that some students have rather than as something fundamental to learning. Why, then, did the focus on discourses not gain more traction? It seems that this was partly because many academic developers, who were given the job of improving teaching, regarded the work of learning skills advisers as irrelevant to students' success. In their paradigm, the only role for learning advisers was to support the instrumental approach by teaching generic skills of time and task management and note taking to help students develop the habits that would maximise their chances of coping with their studies. But “the key to improving learning in higher education is not the provision of skills,” Ramsden (1987) wrote,

but the provision of teaching and assessment that will permit able students to realise their demonstrated potential. By studying how and what students learn, academics can improve their teaching, maximising the chances of students engaging with content in the ways they wish them to engage with it, and identifying misconceptions that require special attention. (p. 151)

## BARRIERS TO COMMUNICATION

The irony here, of course, is that many learning advisers agreed that generic recipes for study were not what students needed, but the things they thought were needed were not widely heard, outside of their own circles. One reason for this seems to have been that the academic developers who represented the work of learning advisers in the terms above ignored the body of work by learning advisers that demonstrated their interest in questions of culture and epistemology, representing them instead as narrowly focused on a “technifica-

tion” of study through imparting a repertoire of strategies to struggling students (Biggs, 1989). While academic developers had to work hard to get the ear of institutional management, they were seen to have more academic authority than learning advisers, and more opportunity, therefore, to promote their preferred approach. However, there may be other reasons for the lesser success of learning advisers’ insistence on the importance of written academic discourse. For one thing, although working one-to-one—as Taylor (1990, p. 70) put it, “engag[ing] seriously,” along with our students, in the problems of the disciplines—was a very effective method of helping students, it limited advisers’ influence on wider institutional policies and practices. Academic developers could suggest curriculum reforms designed to improve all students’ learning in ways that were replicable and, crucially, measurable, which the dialogue between advisers and individual students was not. From these dialogues, learning advisers gained valuable insights into students’ experience, with potential implications for teaching; but their evidence could always be dismissed as “anecdotal”.

Another problem may have been the specialised language of their discussions. The analytical methods that learning advisers used came from applied linguistics, contrastive rhetoric, and sometimes systemic functional linguistics. And here particularly, the grammatical metalanguage of “field, tenor, mode, participants and processes, lexical density and grammatical metaphor” was different from any that discipline lecturers might already have (for examples in use, see e.g., Jones, Gollin, Drury & Economou, 1989). Where academic developers found it easy to talk about deep or surface learning in their meetings with faculty, learning advisers lacked a common language to talk with managers and discipline teaching staff.

## WHAT NEXT?

My focus here has been on the territorial and epistemological divide, in Australia, between the professional groups responsible for students’ learning, as a way of explaining how writing got left out of this picture. Where phenomenographers were interested in how knowledge about reality is cognitively constructed in the mind, learning advisers were interested in how knowledge about interpretation is rhetorically constructed on the page (Chanock, 2011b). The more accessible theory of deep and surface learning, and the resulting paradigm of “constructive alignment” may be useful for improving curriculum design. But they do not address the complexity that learning advisers recognised in students’ encounters with academic cultures, because the phenomenographical theory of approaches to learning was not about culture.

Two and a half decades later, moreover, this complexity is still not adequately addressed, with academic skills commonly provided as a remedial service for “underprepared” students (Baik & Greig 2009). There is, concurrently, a move afoot in Australia and the UK to locate the development of learning skills, in the form of “Graduate Attributes (Skills/Capabilities),” in discipline curricula, and this could provide a space for focussing on the discourses of those disciplines as expressions of their cultures. However, the persistent view that graduate skills are generic and transferable does nothing to encourage such a focus, and there is still the risk that insights from linguistics and from working intensively with students may be lost.

The push to teach generic skills comes from employers and the government, rather than from academics (Commonwealth of Australia, 1998; DETYA, 2000; Hager, Holland, & Beckett, 2002; Nelson, 2003; for the UK, see NAB/UGC, 1984; for Canada, see Metcalfe & Fenwick, 2009). Among scholars of writing in the disciplines, a consensus has been building that little of value can be said about writing at a generic level. The writing of the disciplines reflects their various epistemologies and ways of working, which can differ considerably despite appearances of commonality (Baik & Greig, 2009; Bazerman, 1981; Durkin & Main, 2002; Elton, 2010; Hyland, 2002; Jones, 2009; Magyar, McAvoy, & Forstner, 2011; Parry, 1998; Reid & Parker, 2002; Wingate, 2007). For this reason, “[t]erminology widely used by tutors and/or guidelines to name academic writing conventions . . . [such as] argument and structure. . . ha[s] been signalled . . . as being hugely problematic by a number of researchers” (Lillis & Turner, 2001, p. 58).

The variety of disciplinary discourses has led scholars to question the assumption that expertise in these discourses is transferable, or at least, that transfer can occur from generic instruction to discipline practice (e.g., Baik & Greig, 2009; Gibbs, 2009; Gimenez, in press; Griffin, 1994; Hyland, 2002; Jones, 2009; Kift & Moody, 2009; Neumann, Parry, & Becher, 2002). It seems to follow that explicit instruction in, and development of, academic literacies should be integrated into the curriculum of each discipline. This is a development consistent with the views of learning advisers going back to the nineteen eighties, as we have seen, and with the current view of our peak body, the Association for Academic Language and Learning (AALL), on “best practice.” In its submission to the Good practice principles for English language proficiency for international students in Australian universities, AALL calls for “an integrated approach, [in which] the literacy demands of the discipline become an explicit part of the subjects that students study” (Australian Universities Quality Agency, 2009, Appendix 2, p. 9).

But will such a shift bring opportunities for learning advisers to collaborate with discipline lecturers in reworking their subjects to include a focus on the dis-

courses with which students must engage? Or will they once again be excluded, as suggested by Wingate's view that "[b]ecause of the disciplinary differences in the construction of knowledge, the support of subject tutors rather than that of external 'learning experts' is needed" (2007, p. 395; cf. Gibbs, 2009, p. 5)? This is more than an industrial question (though it is that too). Scholars (including Wingate) point to the problem that discipline lecturers often lack the interest and knowledge required to do this kind of work (Bailey, 2010; Donahue, 2010; Fallows & Steven, 2000; Ganobcsik-Williams, 2004; Jones, 2009; Star & Hammer, 2008; Wingate, 2006, 2007). This is why collaboration is vital: as Elton (2010) puts it, because "[t]he genre of academic writing is discipline dependent, ... neither specialists in academic writing nor practising academics in a discipline can, independently of each other, provide students with the necessary help to develop the ability to write in their academic disciplines" (p. 151; cf. Magyar et al., 2011). He is concerned, however, that the disparity in academic status between learning advisers and discipline lecturers means that "[s]eldom is there a constructive collaboration between equals—discipline specialists and writing specialists—in the interests of students" (Elton, 2010, p. 151).

Even as "best practice" is seen to consist of collaboratively embedding the development of academic writing and other skills into discipline curricula, the actual practice falls well short of this. We must hope that, with the current enthusiasm for returning responsibility for development of academic literacies to the disciplines, learning advisers with their considerable knowledge of these literacies will be called upon to inform effective curriculum renewal.

## NOTE

1. This study is associated with a project by the national Association for Academic Language and Learning (AALL) to develop a searchable database of publications by teachers of academic skills in Australian tertiary institutions. Interested readers can find this soon at <http://www.aall.org.au>.

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