Teaching and Supporting University Students' Academic Writing: A Practitioner's Autoethnographic Reflections on a Decade of Practice

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Introduction

In this chapter, I use autoethnography to reflect critically on my practice as an educator in two regional Australian universities over the last 10 years and detail my professional learning about approaches to supporting university students' academic writing development. This reflection traces the trajectory of my evolving mindset, and considers key factors that have advanced my understanding of the topic. My reflections are underpinned by an interpretive research paradigm that recognises "the importance of the researcher's own subjectivity in the (hermeneutic) process of interpretation … its progressive development as a key part of the inquiry process, thereby adding to the emergent and reflective quality of interpretive research" (Taylor & Medina, 2013, p. 5). Thus I recognise the need to investigate and constantly review the influence of my own values and ideas in interpreting others' experiences and examine the way my assumptions may constrain or distort how I make sense of these. The following reflection is underpinned by the principles of of reflective practice (Dewey, 1933), which can be explained as "the active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions

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to which it tends" (p. 8). Following Schon's views (1983), I believe that a professional practitioner needs more than just technical professionalism; they must also apply the principles of reflective practice to examine problems or issues in their practice and engage with "the understandings which have been implicit in his [sic] action, understandings which he surfaces, criticizes, restructures, and embodies in further action" (p. 50). Reflective practice can help to achieve this through "a process of (1) thinking and questioning and (2) self and contextual awareness, that works toward (3) facilitating learning and improvement" (Tovey & Skolits, 2022, p. 11).

The current study represents my efforts to apply 'reflection-on-action', where I take time to reflect on my experiences after they have occurred, as opposed to 'reflection-in-action', which is applied in-the-moment (Schon, 1983). I use autoethnography to make myself the object of inquiry—as a way to foreground and interrogate important aspects of my thinking and experiences that have shaped how I support students' academic writing development. As a methodological approach, autoethnography reflects a combination of "autobiography and 'ethnography'. This approach "draws on and analyzes or interprets the lived experience of the author and connects researcher insights to self-identity, cultural rules and resources, communication practices, traditions, premises, symbols, rules, shared meanings, emotions, values, and larger social, cultural, and political issues" (Poulos, 2021, p. 4). Autoethnographic approaches generate thick description, which is a description of social action that includes details not just of physical behaviours but also their context as interpreted by participants or actors, creating a more nuanced interpretation for outsiders (Geertz, 1973). In my reflection, I use the researcher's voice (my voice) to make visible selected aspects of my experience, and to produce an "evocative" interpretation that seeks an emotional connection with readers (Le Roux, 2017).

The autoethnographic reflections in this chapter will outline the evolution of my thinking in relation to the topic and will provide a range of insights into how self-study and ethnography can be applied to enhance professional learning. Cooper and Lilyea (2022) note that there is no single correct way to write autoethnography—the goal being "descriptive-realistic writing [that] seeks to depict an 'accurate' story through extensive details that create a picture for the reader" (p. 205). To develop my reflection, I used an active four phase, iterative process, captured in researcher journal form over a four-week period, and represented graphically in Fig. 1. During the initial reflection phase, I reflected on the last ten years of my practice, taking a mind journey to reacquaint myself with my own history and experiences. This is a figurative 'trip down memory lane'. Next, during the analysis phase, I used

a process of zooming and blurring (Rogoff, 1995) to foreground and extract relevant aspects, using a range of prompts, such as incidents, observations, policies, history, media, scholarly literature, expectations, beliefs, attitudes. These prompts were not treated as isolated items to catalogue but rather as thinking prompts to stimulate recall and zoom into one aspect of analysis while blurring out other aspects. This helped me focus on salient features and prevented the analysis from becoming overly complex. Next, I worked to sequence the recollections chronologically and analysed this chronology for gaps and continuity. In the generation phase, I built the personal narrative, which is entwined with, and shaped by theories and ideas from scholarly literature. Finally, through processes of reviewing and setting the narrative, the narrative evolved to a point where it crystallised—which occurred once the narrative reached an iteration that represented, for me, an authentic and satisfying version of the evolution of my mindset. Though I have represented the phases graphically in Fig. 1 in a linear fashion, this is done for ease of representation. The actual process is a messy, emergent, entangled interweaving of ideas and memories, involving considerable drafting and re-drafting. Bochner and Ellis (2016) note that "Autoethnography is not a discourse of order, stability, control, and destiny but one of ambiguity, contradiction, contingency, and chance" (p. 15), and this is reflected in my exploratory approach as I reflect critically on the last 10 years of my practice.

Reflection

The focus of my research for this chapter is not surprising given my long career as an educator in a wide variety of roles united by the common theme of 'access to education'. I can identify the catalyst for the current study in incidents that occurred in my work supporting students' academic writing at a regional Australian university, about 10 years ago. I remember one particular semester when I had a steady stream of appointments with new first year students, who came to my office for support with understanding how to write assignments. The students came from many faculties and courses but were united by the one reaction to the academic writing demands of their courses—they were STRESSED. Some cried.

My initial reaction was—this is to be expected—new university students have not yet learned about academic genres, discourses, tacit expectations, referencing techniques etc.—it is all a matter of skill development and socialisation into the academy. But, as I worked with students, and saw the
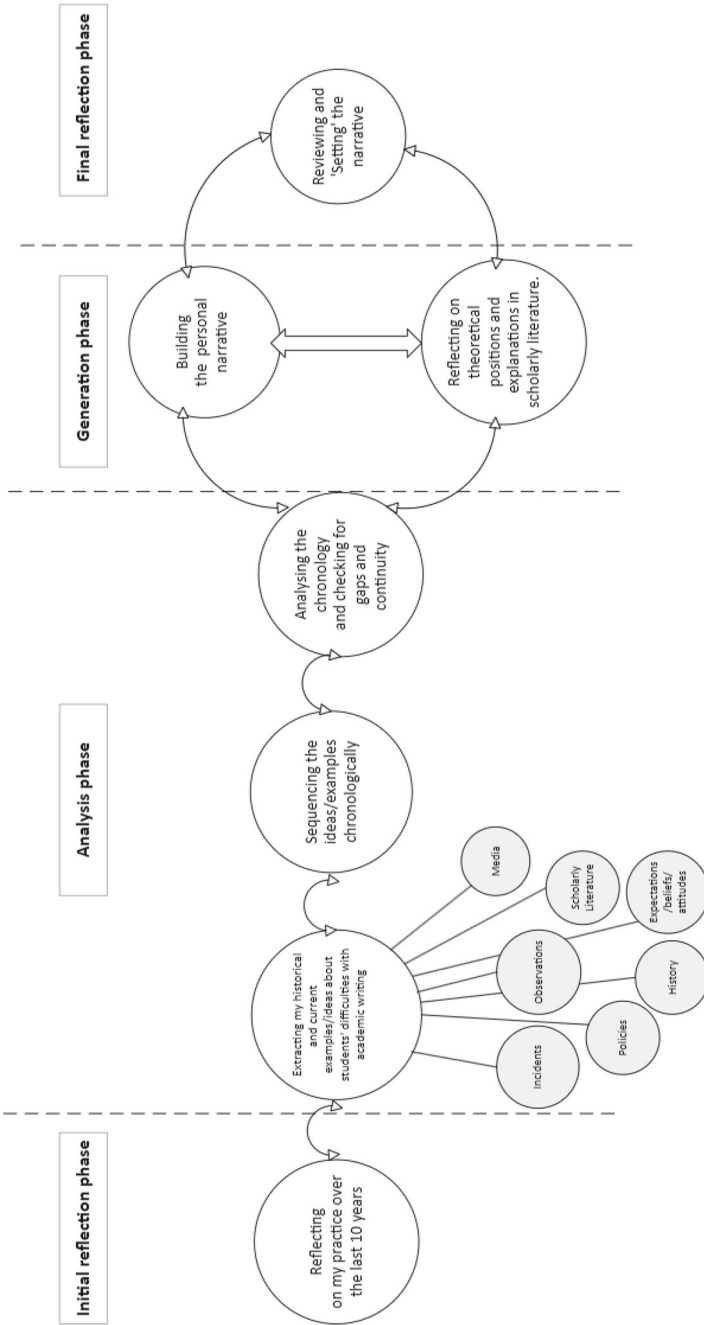
Fig. 1 The four-phase autoethnographic process adopted during reflective practice

assignment tasks they were grappling with, I started to move beyond my original deficit view of students' difficulties. Some of the assignment tasks and instructions were fairly straightforward; however, some were very complex and confusing, with unclear structure, information and related resources were located in a variety of places, font sizes and types varied considerably within the one document, the author's voice and perspective changed constantly, the reading level was very high, sometimes the marking guides were non-existent, or difficult to find, the language used was often overly complex or obscure. I saw assignment task instructions that were a few sentences long and I saw assignment instructions that were five pages long.

The incident I remember best was one occasion, while I was working in a student support role, a student brought me their assignment just before it was due, and asked me to review their report. I asked the student for the marking rubric (the criteria sheet? the marking guide?) and was met with a blank look. They did not know what that was or why they would need it. I managed to find it and we read it together—then we both sat silently as the realisation dawned—that the student had written a report when they were supposed to have created a PowerPoint and prepared an oral presentation. The task instructions had used the word "report"—*You will report on your experience during your fieldwork …* but it did not mention the mode (i.e., a PowerPoint and oral presentation) and the student saw the word "report" so jumped in and wrote a report, using the headings outlined in the task instructions. No doubt there were other resources that would have explained about the requirement for a PowerPoint and oral presentation—perhaps it was discussed in detail in a class the student missed—but it seemed this student had not been able to find, understand and navigate the task instructions, resources and university systems involved in writing a university assignment. Similarly, I saw one student's handwritten assignment and asked why they hadn't typed it; they assured me that it was clearly indicated the answer needed to be handwritten. When I checked the task instructions, it said something like *Choose a topic and write a response that includes the following …* "See," the student told me, "it says *write* a response not *type* a response".

My initial thinking was that students' difficulties with academic writing were due to their own deficiencies—lack of skill and understanding—inadequate experience and skill development during prior schooling … but as I started reading the literature to find out the most effective strategies for supporting these students, I realised there was some criticism of what was termed—'deficit perspectives' or 'deficit discourses' around student's difficulties with academic writing. The development of deficit thinking about students' difficulties can be attributed to traditional views that conceptualised

'literacy' as an autonomous set of skills that can be easily transferred from one academic context to another. Known as the "autonomous model of literacy" (Street, 2003), (or ""graphocentric writing" by decolonial scholars such as Mignolo [2000]), this view "attempts to understand students' difficulties by framing students and their families of origin as lacking the academic, cultural and moral resources necessary to succeed in what is presumed to be a fair and open society" (Smit, 2012, p. 370). Deficit views have significantly influenced educational policy and public opinion and placed 'ownership' of, and responsibility for, literacy squarely with the individual (Prinsloo & Krause, 2019). I started to notice these deficit views of students' difficulties were not just evident in my own thinking but often permeated the language used in course materials, learning support services, and institutional discourses, and indeed were widespread in the research I was reading about academic writing. Davis and Museus (2019) note that deficit thinking in existing research is both pervasive and implicit in "… taken-for-granted cultural values, assumptions, and language that shape[s] social and educational discourse, policy, and practice" (p. 123). Wang et al. (2021) note that "Deficit lenses are typical of research that examines 'gaps' of different kinds, positioning individuals, rather than structural inequities, as the subjects of scrutiny" (p. 2). Deficit views are widespread in studies of academic literacy development and are often used as a lens to investigate and explain students' difficulties. For example, the difficulties encountered by new university students, particularly those from non-traditional backgrounds, with unfamiliar discourses, processes, and practices are frequently framed as deficits in understanding or ability. Research often reports difficulties from a student deficit perspective (Mason & Hajek, 2019, Botha, 2022, Wollscheid et al., 2021). "These views may not be explicitly espoused … yet they are evident in the discourse that these views produce" (Sherwood et al., 2024, p. 3). So deficit perspectives persist. It is argued that pedagogy and support strategies underpinned by deficit views continue to blame the victim for difficulties with academic writing, and "fail to place accountability with oppressive structures, policies, and practices within educational settings" (Patton & Museus, 2019) This represented a shift in my thinking—the idea that there needed to be 'accountability', but what exactly did that mean for an educator? How could I be accountable?

In my roles teaching and supporting students' writing, I wanted to ensure I developed effective strategies that were not shaped by deficit views, so I decided to conduct research with students who were seeking support with their academic writing. In 2016, I surveyed students to discover: *What are*

first-year university students' greatest concerns about writing a particular university assignment? I received 121 student responses, from across six faculties, and I uploaded these to NVivo and analysed them using a process of inductive thematic analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Sub-themes were generated then refined further and categorised into three broad themes. It seemed students' greatest concern about the assignment they were writing included:

1. Institution-related concerns

   a) Understanding and meeting institutional expectations around assignment writing
   b) University practices

2. Assignment-related concerns

   a) Understanding the assignment task
   b) Constructing and controlling the assignment text
   c) Associated skills challenges

3. Personal concerns

   a) Self-efficacy
   b) Time management

(I did note that perhaps I may have received responses only from students who were confident about expressing their concerns and recognised that there may have been students who did not respond to my survey who may have had other concerns than those listed in my findings.)

The conclusions I drew from that study helped broaden my view of the factors that influence students' difficulties with academic writing. Following Patton and Museus' (2019) recommendations for researchers to analyse and clarify how they may have framed deficit perspectives in their research, I noticed that in spite of my raised awareness of deficit views, I still framed some of my findings from a deficit perspective. "*The findings suggest that assignment writing for first-year students commonly causes confusion and frustration, as students struggle to understand and adapt to their discipline's expectations, norms, and language*"" (Sherwood, 2017, unpublished). I suspect this may have been the result of the way I framed the survey questions—with an implicit view that students' difficulties with their assignment will be accompanied by struggle on their part (… and if you struggle with an assignment, doesn't that mean your skills and/or capitals are inadequate for the task?) So in hindsight, it was evident that a deficit perspective had persisted in my own work, and if I was already aware of the problems associated with deficit

thinking, this challenge to shift away from deficit perspectives suddenly became very real.

Notwithstanding these flaws, my findings from the study did manage to shift my focus from text/student-centred difficulties to consider how institutional factors may contribute to students' difficulties. Here, I quote an extract from my researcher notes:

> The study provides evidence that not all first-year students' greatest concerns about assignment writing are focussed on the assignment text they are trying to produce - indeed, there are indications that institutional expectations and practices contribute to assignment writing challenges and may at times create obstacles to assignment writing success.
> When considering approaches to supporting and improving assignment writing success, academic staff should avoid a narrow focus just on the problems evident in students' assignment texts and consider the "contexts, participants and practices" (Lillis, 2001, p. 22) involved in assignment writing. (Sherwood, 2017, unpublished)

This small project raised my awareness of the range and nature of students' difficulties and reinforced for me the notion that efforts to support students' academic writing development needed to adopt a broader focus that students and texts. On reflection, and with further reading, it became apparent that typical pedagogical approaches that focus uncritically on inducting students into the academy, or remediating students' perceived deficits, are problematic on several levels. Not only does this type of approach blame difficulties on individuals' own deficits, environments and cultures but further it fails to acknowledge "systemic influences that shape disparities in social and educational outcomes …[leaving] the focus on individual and cultural 'deficiencies' intact while simultaneously disregarding the powerful forces that produce and perpetuate challenges for historically oppressed populations"'(Patton & Museus, 2019, p. 122). So I was keen to see how I could reshape my own thinking to ensure future my future research and practice addressed these concerns.

One concept that influenced my thinking at the time about students' difficulties that I felt warranted further analysis and reflection, was Bourdieu's theories of capital (1986). I discovered that the notion of 'cultural capital' is the most popular lens used in enabling research studying educational disadvantage (Baker et al., 2020) which explained why I was seeing the concept referenced so often in the research I had been reading. Traditionally, many barriers to access and participation are attributed to deficits in student's 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1986) which is "a resource on which

people draw to navigate social spaces or fields: a knowledge of things valued by the field, including a knowing of how the field operates and how to operate within it" (Gale & Parker, 2017, p. 89). Implicit within discussions about cultural capital is the notion that students' difficulties transitioning to higher education will be easier to overcome by those who possess suitable cultural capital (Patton & Museus, 2019). This seemed to explain why remedial approaches to supporting struggling students were applied so often in the educational settings I worked in. Struggling students were often referred to learning support services and/or counselling services, encouraged to work on developing their skills and cultural capital through engaging with generic skills workshop and enabling courses, and/or supplied with extra resources such as explanatory 'information sheets' on a particular skill (e.g. referencing) or asked to devote additional time to special tutorials or engage with additional course materials and activities. I felt uneasy that these remedial approaches, while well-intentioned, were not always well received by students. All the staff in my department seemed to recognise that 'lack of cultural capital/remediation' type support strategies often carried residual stigma and depended on the struggling students' willingness (or ability) to engage with offerings. I can remember students on different occasions making an appointment to see me (when I was in my Learning Advisor role) and first checking with me, anxiously, and asking whether their lecturer would find out that they had attended support sessions. In their eyes, to need support was to admit inadequacy, and this was not something they wanted to advertise. Staff had frequent discussions about how to present our support strategies in a 'non-deficit' way and get students to attend our workshops and advisory sessions.

While the concept of 'cultural capital' has been a widely used theoretical lens in studies investigating students' challenges transitioning to higher education, I realised that some scholars in the field were starting to question the way it was being used as a conceptual lens and tool for explaining students' difficulties. For example, Naylor and Mifsud (2020) highlight the need to be aware of the potential shortcomings of a 'cultural capital' perspective, including its implicit idea that a lack of cultural capital is a deficit, and the assumption that the problem lies within individuals. They argue that the notion of cultural capital is often misused by researchers, who may adopt a simplistic approach to the idea without using it in the way originally explained by Bourdieu. Further, they argue that a deficit view of cultural capital helps to promote an assimilation narrative around student retention. Similarly, O'Shea (2016) argues that framing discussions about

students' challenges in terms of deficits in their cultural capital "…is fundamentally flawed, as students can be either framed as deficit or replete in capitals depending on how their particular background and capabilities are perceived" (p. 59). I found these views very thought provoking as I had often read and accepted the deficit view of cultural capital as an explanation for their difficulties with academic writing.

I discovered that there were alternative conceptual lenses that could be used to avoid framing students' difficulties from deficit perspectives—and these usually involved shifting the focus from individuals to broader aspects. For example, Devlin and McKay (2014) argue that the solution to deficit conceptions of students' challenges is not to view institutions as the problem, as this just shifts the deficit from individuals to institutions. They suggest there is a need to re-frame the 'problem' and propose instead the notion of 'socio-cultural incongruence' (p. 99) as a more effective way to explain differences in social and cultural capital between students and institutions. Gutiérrez and Rogoff (2003), referring to language development, propose a cultural-historical approach, that recognises the diversity of cultural groups, as an alternative to focussing on student deficits. Similarly, Wang et al. (2021) call for reframing deficit concepts by considering the role of cultural experiences in individual variations in language development and recognising the strengths students bring. Crawford et al. (2022) adopt a systems approach, to "…seek explanations for students' experiences that are beyond their individual capabilities and circumstances and/or that of their lecturers or tutors" (p. 32). Naylor and Mifsud (2020) adopt a structural inequality approach that "…asks us to consider the way that institutional staff, other students, and even family members and friends distant from the university, make explicit and implicit positioning acts that determine whether an equity student has access to the same opportunities and experiences as those from other backgrounds" (p. 1). This was enlightening for me to see that difficulties could be 're-framed' to avoid blaming students for them. It was evident to me that the way to disrupt deficit perspectives would involve reframing difficulties using an alternative to a 'deficit' lens.

Further reading led me to consider how 'embedding' academic literacy development in the disciplines might be a more effective approach than the 'autonomous skills' approach that treated academic writing as a set of generic, easily transferred skills that underpinned traditional approaches to pedagogy. The 'embedded' approach was just starting to be implemented at my institution and learning support staff were encouraged to collaborate with discipline lecturers to embed academic literacy development within the disciplines. As part of my role, I spent some time co-teaching with

discipline lecturers and working to embed academic literacy development in their courses. This was sometimes an effective approach and other times not. I realised that the lecturer's attitude often played a role in how effective the lessons were, and I thought that might help to explain one aspect of my survey results—many students were concerned about understanding and meeting institutional expectations around assignment writing and were uncertain about university practices. Perhaps lecturers influenced students' difficulties (either contributed to, or eased them), depending on whether or not they were foregrounding academic writing skill development as an integral part of the subject, and in doing so, helping to make tacit expectations and practices explicit. With further reading, I learned that even though lecturers may be the ideal people to induct their students into disciplinary practices and discourses, some may struggle to do so. "Awareness of having knowledge does not mean that the knower can explain the process by which that knowledge was gained" (McGrath et al., 2019). Through my work with discipline lecturers, I realised that lecturers do not necessarily see themselves as teachers of writing and may in fact have difficulty making institutional expectations of academic writing explicit to their students. I thought this might explain some lecturers' lack of enthusiasm for embedding academic writing development in their subjects. While subject lecturers may seem to be the ideal people to address this lack of preparedness, lecturers' feelings of inadequacy, uncertainty, or the belief that it is not their role to address these needs may contribute to hesitation or reluctance to do so (Jonsmoen & Greek, 2017; Murray & Nallaya, 2016). This left me feeling troubled and uncertain about the efficacy of embedded approaches to supporting new university students' academic writing development. [*Note: A recent study by Bassett and McNaught (2024) found little empirical evidence of positive impact of embedded approaches on students' academic performance—so the debate continues.*]

I had reached a point in my professional development where I felt confident I had collated a good body of evidence that contested deficit discourses about students' academic writing difficulties, but I continued to see widespread evidence of "deficit" narratives underpinning pedagogy and support strategies for students' academic writing development. I spent some time reading and reflecting on why deficit perspectives are such an issue and concluded that such views are problematic in the field of learning and teaching in higher education because they "may lead staff and institutions to a subconscious position that limits their responsiveness and accountability for addressing issues associated with access and participation" (Sherwood et al., 2024, n.p.). Deficit perspectives may fuel a wide array of negative consequences and perpetuate assumptions that systems should seek 'quick

fix' approaches that reinforce hegemonic systems and fail to address the underlying causes of barriers encountered by traditionally disadvantaged populations. Valencia (2010) argues that deficit thinking: "…ignores the role of systemic factors in creating school failure, lacks empirical verification, relies more on ideology than science, grounds itself in classism, sexism, and racism, and offers counterproductive educational prescriptions for school success" (p. 7). Deficit views also have a negative impact on students by contributing to further labelling and stigmatising of already disadvantaged students who may internalise deficit views of themselves (Cabiles, 2024).

In more recent times, I discovered the seminal work of Lea and Street (1998), who framed thinking about academic literacy using three models— the *study skills* model, the *socialisation* model, and the *academic literacies* model. The authors note that the three models are not mutually exclusive but overlap and can be applied in any academic context (Lea & Street, 2006). I was quite fascinated to realise that, without being aware of it, my evolving mindset had aligned with the evolution of these three models. These models provided me with additional insights to inform my professional learning, particularly in relation to deficit thinking about students' difficulties with academic writing. Lea and Street (1998) frame understandings of academic writing development from three perspectives or models. The first *study skills* model views academic literacy as an individual cognitive skill and the pedagogical focus is on surface features such as spelling, punctuation and grammar. There is an expectation that academic writing can be taught as a set of generic study skills that are easily transferred from one context to another. The second *academic socialisation* model is underpinned by a view that students need to be acculturated into disciplinary and subject-based discourses and genres. This model presumes that once students have understood the 'ground rules' of academic discourse they will be able to reproduce it without difficulty. Both models lend themselves to deficit framings of students' challenges with academic writing. I recognised these framings in my earliest approaches to supporting students' academic development—it was all about the assignment. Had students addressed the question effectively? Had they followed academic and genre conventions as required? Was the language reflective of appropriate disciplinary discourses? Had they produced a text that looked and sounded as it was supposed to? Those who struggled to meet expectations obviously had a range of deficits that needed remediating if they were going to succeed with academic writing at university. Didn't they?

Later developments in my thinking reflected Lea and Street's third *academic literacies* model. This framing emerged from the New Literacy Studies movement in the 1980's and 1990's. This model challenged deficit

explanations of students' difficulties, and the normative, transmission-type models of academic literacy reflected in the skills and socialisation approaches. Researchers in the New Literacy Studies tradition highlighted the evolving conceptualisation of academic literacies in response to factors such as technological development, changing demographics, attitudes and practices (Gillen, 2014). Considered a 'disruptor' of traditional views of literacy (Neuman & Gambrell, 2015), and "central manifesto of the new literacies movement" (Leander & Boldt, 2013, p. 23), the *academic literacies* model reconceptualised literacy as plural—literacies—and "broadened the view of literacy practices to include how students work across languages, mediums and modalities to produce and consume texts, and form meaning" (Vasilopoulos, 2022, p. 177). This *academic literacies* model incorporates both the previous study skills and socialisation models, and highlights the multi-dimensional nature of the literacy concept. Further, it encompasses a view of academic literacies as "shared cultural ways of using and valuing literacy in different contexts" (Papen, 2023, p. 70). The approach aims to make visible "the role that institutions play in the way writing is conceived of …[and] helps to uncloak the problems relating to practice rather than locating the problem with student writer" (Aiken, 2021, p. 2). This conceptualisation has reframed students' difficulties from problems resulting from individuals' deficits to problems resulting from practice. This development represents a significant shift in deficit thinking; it becomes "the responsibility of the teacher, not the learner, to consider what might need to be changed" (Haggis, 2006, p. 11).

I recognised that my own evolving mindset had led me to arrive at the same conclusion—students' difficulties with assignment writing were not due to students deficits but rather located with issues of practice. I saw that many educators and researchers had been focussing on students and texts—rather than the as situated practices that shaped learning and text production. Sang (2017) notes that "literacy is situated because literacy practices are different in different contexts" (p. 17). So, using these new insights, I worked to develop approaches that valued the literacies students brought to classrooms, and tried to empower students by raising their awareness of tacit institutional expectations around academic writing, and the disciplinary differences they might encounter. For example, we compared assignments from two different faculties and considered issues such as how different disciplinary discourses and contexts may have influenced the framing of the tasks, and discussed why rubrics weighted allocated more marks higher for some aspects of an assignment.

Further investigation led me to realise that while the academic literaciesmodel is recognised as an alternative to deficit framings of students' difficulties with academic writing (and is seen by many as the ideal model for shaping writing curriculum and pedagogy) applying the model in practice was problematic. It occurred to me that I understood the theory behind the model and could make some tentative efforts to apply the principles in my classrooms, but it was not an easy task as there was no cohesive guidance on what the model looked like on a practical level. I discovered there have been some efforts by educators to apply the academic literacies model in curricula and classrooms, and this has resulted in mixed outcomes. For example, Olsson et al. (2021) report on their study where progressively integrated the academic literacies principles into an introductory bachelor's level course over nine years. In spite of some positive results, they noted a number of unresolved challenges for educators wanting to apply academic literacies principles, and suggested there is a need to "strengthen and extend the AcLits [academic literacies] framework through reflective practice and independent research" (p. 484). Research has suggested that educators face ongoing challenges adopting the transformative approaches recommended by the *academic literacies* approach as it does not bridge the the theory–practice divide easily. "Historically, a major criticism of the academic literacies model has been its tendency to be more focussed on theory and research than practical applications and [there are] claims it is 'insufficiently nuanced'" (Hilsdon et al., 2019, p. 18). In addition, there is no unified understanding of what an *academic literacies* approach means in practice (Hilsdon et al., 2019). Lillis and Scott (2007) criticise the "considerable fluidity and at times confusion in meanings attached to the use of the phrase [academic literacies]" (p. 6). Hilsdon et al. (2019) concur and argue that there is a need for further investigation of what the term academic literacies means in practice. Stevenson and Baker (2024) note that "delivering ALL [academic language and literacy] support within universities is notoriously challenging, partly because impoverished understandings of academic literacies drive reductive 'study skills' and 'bolt-on' approaches that situate ALL beyond the curriculum" (p. 2). Lymer et al (2024) argue that the academic literacies model needs to "widen its lens of inquiry and support" [and] "pay more attention to the multidimensionality of the construct of academic literacy …cross[ing] the boundaries to integrate the language, disciplinary and sociocultural aspects of academic literacy development within a holistic view of literacy teaching and learning" (xx). Similarly, Ho et al. (2024) call for a more nuanced understanding of literacy practices, particularly "what people do, when, and why they do it"

and highlight a need to "…further inspect the concrete courses of action in which texts are embedded" (Lymer et al., 2024, p. 1).

I realised my thinking about students' academic writing development over the last ten years had evolved considerably, and in many places aligned closely with theoretical developments in the literature—but what were the implications of this for my professional practice? I had a good theoretical understanding of the topic but was still questioning how that could be applied. In my continuing effort to improve my practice, I discovered the notion of 'bounded agency', and I saw this as a very useful concept for helping shift deficit perspectives of students' difficulties. Once I was aware of the notion, I saw examples all around me. The most memorable one came in the form of incarcerated students' responses to an assignment question that had asked them to identify and discuss challenges they had encountered while studying an enabling education course I was teaching. Challenges ranged from trying to focus on study materials accompanied by their cellmates' stentorian snoring, to imposed time limitations that affected students' ability to complete assignments due to 'lights-out' policies, unpredictable prison lockdowns that cut off their access to resources and support from their Education Officer, and having to negotiate with a cell mate to lower the volume on the television in the shared cell so the student could concentrate. These types of challenges reported by students reinforced for me the notion that assignment writing is a situated practice, that occurs in diverse contexts, and students' agency is constrained by a wide range of factors.

I used this notion of *bounded agency* as a conceptual lens in a research project I conducted with colleagues, investigating deficit perspectives and barriers to access and engagement in an enabling education program (Sherwood et al., 2024). This research helped me to formalise my understanding that there are many factors beyond a student's control that can create difficulties with academic writing and helped me realise that deficit perspectives may be underpinned by a belief that "student agents are empowered, autonomous subjects … who have the locus of control" (Inouye et al., 2022). The notion of bounded agency agency (Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009) recognises that "while an individual may have some degree of agency in a given situation, this agency may be constrained or limited by a range of factors beyond their control, such as structural inequalities and systemic barriers … A bounded agency perspective will help to expose and highlight the range of factors that contributed to the creation of barriers" (Sherwood et al., 2024, p. xx). I realised, however, that while the concept of 'bounded agency' could help me understand the nature of diverse and multiple barriers that affected students' successful study at university, it could not provide me with a cohesive way

of understanding the nature and impact of all the factors that could affect academic writing practices.

My mindset and approach to supporting students' academic writing have evolved considerably over the last ten years, moving from a student-centric and text-centric focus to a more complex conceptualisation of academic writing as situated social practices, influenced by the academic literacies model. However, I discovered that while the academic literacies model has been recognised for broadening understanding of the plurality and multi-dimensionality of literacy and literacy teaching and learning (Cazden et al., 1996), it has also been challenged to "widen its lens of inquiry and support … [and] pay more attention to the multidimensionality of the construct of academic literacy …cross[ing] the boundaries to integrate the language, disciplinary and sociocultural aspects of academic literacy development within a holistic view of literacy teaching and learning" (Li, 2022, p. 20). Similarly, Lillis and Turner (2001) argue that current academic writing practices need to be located "within a broader historical and epistemological framework both in order to reach a deeper understanding about what's involved in student writing and in order to inform meaningful pedagogies" (p.57). Richards and Pilcher (2017) argue that "it is possible there may be elements Academic Literacies is failing to gain access to by not asking the question of what students need to do in order to succeed, rather than the question what do students need to do to produce a successful text" (p. 166). There are calls for researchers to "…further inspect the concrete courses of action in which texts are embedded" (Lymer et al., 2024, p. 2), develop a more nuanced understanding of literacy practices, particularly "what people do, when, and why they do it" (Ho et al., 2024, p. 1).

If researchers and educators maintain a narrow focus on students and their efforts to produce acceptable texts, then approaches to teaching and supporting students' development of academic literacies will likely continue to focus on the individual's abilities (or lack thereof) and push for mastery of normative cultural and textual conventions. It occurred to me I needed a broader, more holistic conceptualisation of academic writing that considered both the "human and more-than-human" (Burnett et al., 2020, p. 46) aspects of academic writing tasks, as this might provide a more nuanced understanding of factors that create challenges for students. If educators had a better understanding of the human and non-human factors that contribute to difficulties, wouldn't this provide insights into how contexts could be shaped to facilitate academic writing and minimise or remove constraints? Difficulties may no longer be viewed as the result of student deficits, but could perhaps be explained as contradictions and tensions within broader

systems and networks. My current thinking has now shifted to pondering how I can conceptualise academic writing in ways that de-centre humans and allow for a holistic framing of the complexities and relationality of academic writing. Emerging developments in the literature seem to hold potential solutions worth exploring. For example, although materials have always been seen as part of literacy practices, recently some materialist and posthumanist researchers have suggested that we need to pay greater attention to materials and spaces to better understand how the social and the material interrelate (Burnett et al., 2020). And it is this idea of relationality that seems exciting and worthy of closer consideration in relation to academic writing. For instance, Lemieux and Rowsell (2020) propose an intriguing view of agency—one where agency is not located with humans but emerges from mutual relationships between objects and humans. For me this was a very novel idea that prompted me to turn my practitioner's gaze towards the contexts of academic writing activities and reflect on how a better understanding of the nature, impact and relationality of contextual factors might help to improve my approach to teaching and supporting students' academic writing.

Thinking back to my meeting 10 years ago with the student who wrote a report instead of a PowerPoint and speech, I wonder which contextual factors may have contributed to the student's challenges completing the task effectively. I wonder too, if an educator could have pre-emptively shaped the context differently to facilitate the students' understanding of the task? This would have necessitated a fairly nuanced understanding contextual factors that impact academic writing tasks, environments and practices. Could these types of insights help to disrupt deficit perspectives of students' difficulties and provide guidance for pedagogy, practice and research? I decided the next phase in the development of my professional practice required an investigation of academic writing in context, within a specific course, with specific groups, with a specific assignment task. My research approach will de-centre humans, and surface contextual factors to discover their nature and impact on academic writing practices. The potential framings already exists and have been applied in a variety of contexts. For example, the notions of *literacy-as-event* (Burnett & Merchant, 2018), *assemblage* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) and *activity systems* (Engeström,) have all been used in educational research and offer promising ways of framing assignment writing practices holistically. Further research is needed, though, to explore how these framings can be used to help educators shape academic writing contexts, pedagogy and practices to facilitate teaching and learning, and avoid unnecessary and unhelpful deficit framings of the student difficulties with academic writing.

But that is a story for the future.

Key Professional Learnings and Final Insights

Over the past years, I have worked in various roles teaching and supporting university students' academic writing development. My mindset and approach to teaching and supporting students have evolved considerably in that time. My perception of students' difficulties with academic writing were originally grounded in a deficit perspective that attributed students' difficulties to individual deficiencies in skills and capitals. This mindset shaped my pedagogical strategies, prompting the development of teaching strategies aimed at remediating students' gaps, and socialising students into the academy. My view of student difficulties gradually evolved after being exposed to a range of factors and opportunities, including: reviewing a wide range of assessment tasks from many disciplines, having conversations with groups and individual students' about their writing challenges—in both formal and informal settings, conducting a survey of students about their academic writing concerns, co-teaching with lecturers from other disciplines, reading scholarly literature on the topic, and conducting further research that considered how student agency is bounded is bounded. I had now reached a point where I recognised that my previous conceptualisations of of academic writing had been too narrowly bounded and fragmented. I liken my previous conceptualisations to the parable of the blind men who were trying to discover what an elephant was by each touching a different part of its body. Each man assumed that his narrow perception of the animal (such as the trunk or the tail) was sufficient to describe the whole animal. My main conclusion from reflecting on my practice and evolving mindset over the last ten years is that I have been 'touching' different parts of the animal (i.e. 'academic writing') and assuming my perceptions of that portion were sufficient to know the whole beast—which is not very helpful when you need to teach people what an elephant is! My key professional learnings from this reflective process include the following realisations:

- The conceptual lens one uses to frame students' difficulties with academic writing has a significant influence on policy, discourses and pedagogy. Certain lenses (e.g. the *study skills* model and the *academic* socialisation models of academic writing) may frame student difficulties in ways that

encourage deficit perspectives of students' abilities and locate the responsibility for addressing these with the student. This can create barriers that may constrain student success with with academic writing.

- Deficit perspectives persist in policy, pedagogy and research, in spite of the academic literacies model's theoretical developments that have shifted from a human-centric focus to a practice-centric focus. There is a need to extend the model further and consider both the 'human and more-than-human' aspects of academic writing practices to develop a more nuanced understanding of the nature and impact of contextual factors on academic writing practices.

- While the context in which academic writing is situated has generally been acknowledged as influential, there is a need to frame academic writing activities and practices in ways that foreground contextual factors to allow consideration of their influence of academic writing practices.

- I now believe approaches to supporting students' writing that are text-centric and/or human centric are problematic. They can lead to the development of pedagogical approaches that prioritize text and language and ignore or minimise contextual factors that shape writing practices. This can encourage the development of deficit perspectives to explain student difficulties and can encourage normative, schematic teaching strategies that may reinforce hegemonic systems and fail to address the underlying causes of obstacles encountered by traditionally disadvantaged populations (Davis & Museus, 2019).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have reflected critically on the last decade of my professional practices as an educator in two universities. I have used autoethnography and 'reflection-on-action' to obtain a range of nuanced insights about the nature of academic writing and the evolution of my mindset about the best approaches to teaching and supporting students' development as academic writers. These insights have helped me identify a range of strengths and weaknesses in my practice, and highlighted aspects in need of further development. I plan to apply these new insights to explore academic writing practices further. I believe that a closer examination of the contextual aspects of academic writing practices is needed to advance the widening participation agenda in higher education. Through a more nuanced and holistic understanding of the relationality and impact of the contextual aspects of academic writing practices, educators will be able to design context-sensitive academic

writing pedagogy and assessment to minimise barriers that create difficulties for students and cater more effectively to the academic writing development needs of increasingly diverse university student cohorts.

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