PASAA

Book Review

A Philosophical Approach to Perceptions of Academic Writing Practices in Higher Education: *Through a Glass Darkly*

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1. Overview

Academic writing can often be presented as a paint-by-numbers practice in which form, structure, and mechanics are emphasized. Teaching by default constructs a deficit model of writing ability, wherein the learner is seen to have problems that require remediation. There is subsequently little opportunity for teachers or students to critique the view that language skills are the only aspects of academic writing that need to be developed.

Of course, competence and confidence in academic writing do not come naturally. However, it is arguably easier to learn for those who have been raised in the cultural and educational context in which academic standards are set, while for those who are not thus acculturated—non-native speakers, as well as minorities—academic discourse can be intimidating, alien, and exclusionary. There is, thus, a disconnect between the discourse that assumes academic writing consists of identifiable and teachable features, and the actual process of acquiring academic writing proficiency.

French's new study in *A Philosophical Approach to Perceptions of Academic Writing Practices in Higher Education* addresses these issues by examining academic writing as ideological and identity-based social practices. The book is motivated by questions concerning how academics' identities evolve, and how in turn they become part of the discourse in which "good" academic writing is expected without being defined or taught. To explore these issues, French asks the practitioners themselves, and the resulting manuscript offers an interesting discussion that slots well into the growing corpus which challenges presumed normative academic writing practices, in particular from the standpoints of ideology (e.g. Shapiro, 2022) and identity (e.g. Flowerdew & Wang, 2015). In this vein, French conducts a post-qualitative, genealogical analysis of interviews with lecturers and postgraduate students turning principally to concepts such as habitus (e.g. Bourdieu, 1977), power/discipline (e.g. Foucault, 1995), and the rhizome (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) to inform her findings.

2. Summary

The book contains five chapters. Chapter 1 outlines the historical context in which academic writing has been constructed in recent decades. French traces an elitist "moral panic" concerned with falling writing standards that has emerged since the "massification of education," i.e., the considerable increase in the number of higher education institutions and enrolments, and the influx of non-native speakers. Underpinning this panic is a lack of recognition that academic writing practices are social practices imbued with power relations, hierarchies, and ideologies in which academic identities are formed, sustained, and accorded status. The problem is that academic writing is not actually taught. Instead, academic writing practices are "part of a generative rhizomic configuration of entangled intra-actions, experiences, and discourses" (p. 6) that serve to privilege some and exclude others through disciplining within academia. It thus becomes necessary to critique the skills-based model of writing, which assumes an ideological and cultural neutrality. In conjunction, undefined normative models of writing are expected, and disciplinary power is exerted to both control learner

behavior. Consequently though, creativity and critical thinking are curtailed rather than encouraged.

Chapter 2 explores how academic writing conventions are internalized by academics. Here, French's objective is to examine what academics think they know about their "everyday professional practices, but also…their misrecognition or 'meconnaisance' of them" (p. 47). Drawing on the concept of the "professional academic writing in higher education habitus," French argues that although the individual's personal history and development in academia may be unique, pre-existing constraints and rules serve to create the "disciplinary network" within which not only professional writing identities "accrete," but then in turn come to enact, self-regulate, and reproduce dominant conventions and practices.

Chapter 3 sets out a post-qualitative research paradigm to explore how academic writing practices help "create educatedness" (p. 57) within the context that academics and students are judged as lacking academic writing skills while simultaneously being expected to develop their professional habitus without explicitly learning academic writing. French here makes the valid observation that academic writing emerged from homogenous groups, i.e., white European males, and continues to have traditional Eurocentric conceptualizations, namely as being autonomous, objective, and technicist, among others. "Good" academic writing then, is in essence not an inherent and self-explanatory quality of writing, but a site of power and dominance.

In chapter 4, French presents and discusses her findings from participant interviews, which includes lecturers and postgraduate students. Through numerous quotations, French constructs a narrative which reveals the complex relationships new and experienced academics have with academic writing practice and discourse. Topics include attitudes toward prestigious journals, the gatekeeping role of journal editors, and the enduring pressure by academics that their career success depends on prestigious publications which demand

conformity and deference to previous works within a paradoxical imperative to write something original and new. Ironically, commensurate with these tensions is the sense of being forced into publishing work that no-one reads and a desire to break out of the confines of expected forms of writing.

The final chapter offers some preliminary reflections on how academic writing discourse and practice might evolve. Here French claims to adopt a "queered take," which she loosely defines as concerning "subjects, objects, practices, and events that are not only non-normative, but that are deliberately and wilfully 'other'" (p. 134) in order to both celebrate unconventional approaches and unsettle established "hegemonic optics" of academic writing. In a sense, French is seeking to create a space whereby academic writers can claim their own space or indeed establish their own voice, which scholars often acknowledge is an elusive concept (Stock & Eik-Nes, 2016). French proposes a number of reconceptualizations, not of academic writing *per se*, but in terms of training academics to adopt a metacognitive approach to writing practices so as ultimately to question them. The aim is to create more community-oriented practices for developing academic writing where, for example, lecturers more explicitly discuss expectations for student writing and in general where subjective experiences, dialogic interactions, and discipline-specific writing practices are contested as part of the evolution of the academic writing habitus.

3. Commentary

In keeping with the title, the aim of the book is not to provide definitive answers about what "good" academic writing is or how it should be judged. Instead, because even among academics there are in fact no clear definitions, there is a need to reimagine academic writing practices, especially for those who have heretofore been marginalized by the dominant rhetoric regarding the notion of "quality."

Without wishing to sound cynical, French's work fits well into the current social and academic zeitgeist. Her focus is on marginalized learners, women, Black, Asian and other minorities, people with disabilities, and LGBT+ communities, all of whom are "systematically othered and excluded" (p. 54) as they grapple to fit into "pervasive cultural homogeneity/hegemony" (ibid). Claims such as these can sound absolute but are often not qualified or elaborated.

Another critique concerns the absence of any mention of the EFL/ELT context, where learners most surely are to be counted among those who find learning academic writing in English a major challenge. Indeed, the book is obviously concerned with native English-speaking scholars. This would explain the somewhat questionable claim that they are not taught academic writing and must learn it as part of their indoctrination into academia. This may be true to an extent, but it is occasionally difficult to reconcile this claim with the fact that most universities do have various writing programs for both native and non-native speaking academics.

The reader most likely to find the book useful will foremost be one who is engaged in analyzing academic writing from a theoretical perspective, in particular with an interest in academic identity, and, for example, 'imposter syndrome'—a concept which pervades the book. This is not any kind of guidebook for academic writers. Rather, in positioning itself as a challenge to existing normative conceptualizations and disciplinary power, French's book is a welcoming if perhaps occasionally uneven addition to academic writing research, and is recommended reading for any instructor, practitioner, or postgraduate researcher interested in conceptualizing a more inclusive approach to academic writing practices and pedagogy.

4. References

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