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Content matters: Curriculum development challenges in academic writing programs

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While still uncommon in the Australian HE context, a growing number of institutions are offering units for credit specifically focused on academic writing outside of specific disciplinary contexts or serving students from across disciplines (AALL, 2015; Barthel, 2013). Given a longstanding consensus in the field that teaching 'form', 'mechanics' or 'skills' in isolation from specific disciplinary content is problematic, the question of what content to have students write *about* in such units is raised. Drawing on interviews with staff and students in North American writing programs, where credit bearing academic writing programs have been a standard feature of higher education at all levels for more than 50 years (Berlin, 1987; Graves & Graves, 2006; Smit, 2004),this paper identifies three key curriculum challenges: 1.) to inspire or engage; 2) to link between prior knowledge and writing experience and the academic context in higher education, and 3). to enable transfer of writing knowledge to new contexts. The different approaches to the 'content challenges' identified in the interviews, as well as more generally the views and experience of practitioners and students provide important perspective for the Australian Language and Learning community. The discussion of curriculum in writing programs specifically references a current debate in the North American composition community prompted by the 'writing about writing' (WAW) movement (Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2015; Downs & Wardle, 2007; Wardle, 2009;) to argue that while there remains diversity in approaches, attention to discourse and genre theory in writing instruction is a valuable element of curriculum design.

Key words: academic writing; composition; curriculum; North America; content.

1. Introduction

The centrality of 'writing' within the curriculum in higher education in Australia, and in English speaking universities more generally, is widely acknowledged (Arkoudis & Tran, 2010; Hyland, 2013). Writing in universities continues to function both as a means of assessment and of learning (Lea & Stierer, 2000; Hounsell, 1984) and is also seen as part of the 'skill-set' that students are expected to develop and take with them into their professional careers (Graduate Careers Australia, 2016). Despite the centrality of writing, surprisingly little time in the Australian curriculum is devoted to teaching or learning activities focused primarily on developing writing. This can in part be attributed to a longstanding assumption or expectation that this 'basic' skill has been learned in prior education, or will be learned by 'along the way' (Clerehan, 2002; Skillen, 2006; Taylor et al. 1988; Wingate, 2006), or possibly because teaching writing and communication is

seen by discipline based faculty as requiring expertise beyond their capabilities, or beneath their notice (Chanock, 2007, p. 273). Nevertheless, as Arkoudis and Doughney (2014) note, many academics, students, researchers and stakeholders do continue to recognise the importance of incorporating the teaching of English language proficiency, or 'communication skills' into the curriculum.

In this respect, it is not surprising to find that different approaches for the teaching of writing are being considered, or have been implemented in Australian Universities. Though it has not been a regular feature of the Australian approach to academic literacy, a number of institutions are now offering subjects or units for credit specifically focused on academic writing, or academic language and learning issues, outside of any specific disciplinary context or serving students from across various disciplines (AALL, 2015; Barthel, 2013). This different approach to provision of academic literacy development poses a number of challenges. These include the challenge of curriculum: not only a question of how to select a focus, or topics, or tasks within the broad field of academic literacy, but where to start and how to sequence learning activities. A related issue is engagement. The task of engaging students in deep learning takes on a different hue when one is directly responsible for designing the environment for learning, and also for assessing that learning (rather than, as is often the case in supporting roles, standing alongside students who are 'responding' or 'reacting' to the curriculum as given by discipline-based faculty members) (see, for example, Chanock, 2011, 2007; Waldo, 2004). Above all, there is the challenge of 'transfer', especially if the academic writing 'course' sits outside of any particular disciplinary context (Yancey, Robertson & Taczak 2014).

This paper seeks to provide a clearer sense of what these curricular challenges are, and explore how some practitioners and students, who participate in curricular 'writing' programs as a regular part of undergraduate education, have responded. It is helpful to look outside of the Australian context in terms of both the academic literacies research literature, and the experience of practitioners. Given that in North American higher education, credit bearing writing programs (under various designations, such as 'Rhetoric and Composition', the Writing program, the Writing Centre and so on) have been the norm, this context provides an obvious focus. And while the relative merits and challenges of the support model in various guises have been debated extensively in the literature in Australia (see, for example, Chanock, 2011 for a comprehensive review), less attention has been paid to the issues of credit bearing, cross disciplinary writing courses or subjects (see, for example, Fenton-Smith et al. 2017; Melles et al. 2005; Star & Hammer, 2008; as exceptions).

By contrast, an extensive literature in the north American context, moreover, has considered various approaches, institutional settings, and issues (see, for example, Berlin, 1987; Crowley, 1998; Murphy, 2012; Smit, 2004), but it is valuable to gain the insight of practitioners 'on the ground' and students who are engaged in their classes to identify how far the 'theory' extends into practice, as well as how practice further informs the theory. The following paper is based on interviews conducted with teaching staff and students in a variety of North American universities, as well as a survey of research literature. In using the broader term, 'North American', both Canadian and US institutions are included, (though remaining conscious of the fact that there are significant differences between the two and that a third important North American country, Mexico, has not been included at all. Where possible or necessary specific reference to The United States context, or Canada is given).

What emerges from this study is also that while North American teachers of writing share ALL practitioners' wariness of simplistic notions of 'writing as a generic skill', the challenge of teaching 'content' that engages, enables linking and transfer is distinct from the challenge of offering adjunct or support tutorials.

2. Background and context

Histories of North American 'writing programs' paint a picture of a large and diverse field with varying objectives, interests, backgrounds and approaches (Mullin, 2006). The term, 'writing program' can refer to or include a variety of different programs in tertiary institutions, including most commonly First Year Composition (FYC), The Writing Requirement, Writing in the Disciplines (WID), Writing across the Curriculum (WAC), the 'writing centre' (usually including peer support and 'resource' centres, potentially under the supervision of a broader writing program) and also English for Academic Purposes (EAP) as well as the older names for the field such as composition and rhetoric or 'rhet-comp'.

While there has been diversification of the type of programs that might fall under the 'writing' banner, the idea of Freshman, or First-Year 'writing courses' as credit-bearing, compulsory or near compulsory parts of the standard curriculum across all faculties and divisions remains a standard feature of US higher education. In Canada it appears that the field of writing and first year composition was more consistently dominated by 'English literature' departments. Graves (1994, cited in Smith [2006]) suggested that "Canadian English departments market their courses to students and other departments as if they were 'universal guides to clear writing'", but in reality they are "introductions to reading and writing within the discipline of English studies".

The writing curriculum today features a range of different pedagogical models and theoretical perspectives. As shown by Tate et al. (2014), these include remnants of the 'current traditional' rhetoric – which focused on form, and product, an ordered and 'programmatic' expression such as the standard 'five paragraph' essay, as well as standardized, grammar, syntax and persuasive devices – which informed the teaching of writing throughout the twentieth century (see also Berlin, 1982; Bloom, Daiker, & White, 1996; Smit, 2004). Against this dominant strain, we find various degrees of 'progressive' approaches to writing including the 'process' and 'expressivist' approaches emphasising the individual voice of the writer and their development of that 'voice' in response to different situations. More recently, theoretical perspectives arising out of social and functional linguistics such as 'genre' (Bazerman, 2011), 'disciplinary discourses' (Hyland, 2004), situated and multi-literacies (see. Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Gee, 2004, 2008), as well as 'critical' literacy (see Benesch, 2001) and 'critical pedagogy' have begun to inform courses and teaching practice as well as research in the field.

3. Recent debates and divisions: The content problem

Despite common ground, significant debates continue about how best to approach the task of teaching students to write at university. Among the more radical views is that if writing is to be taught at all, it should only be taught in the context of particular disciplines rather than in 'generic' or compulsory 'first-year' writing classes. As Smit (2004) suggests, "colleges and universities should not require students to take just one or two narrowly conceived 'introductory' writing classes but to get as much practice as possible writing for a variety of purposes and in a variety of genres in a variety of disciplines and social contexts both inside and outside the academy" (p.185). Though it would not be accurate to say that advocates of Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) or Writing in the disciplines (WID) see *no* place for the introductory or 'general' writing course (Russell, 2002) implicit in both WID and WAC is a critique of the 'contentless' and decontextualised nature of the generic course.

The problematic issue of content in the writing curriculum winds through the history of writing instruction from the earliest manifestations to the present. Initially, the content issue was solved by a focus on 'culture' or 'civics' or on literature, or by an exclusive and reductive focus on mechanics, form, grammar, syntax, and rhetorical devices. With the progressive and expressivist turn of the 1960s and 1970s, the responsibility for 'content', in some cases at least, was turned over to students; allowing students freer rein in what they wrote about was easily aligned with the aims of liberalising education. This approach, however, may not have been all that liberating

insofar as many students were directed toward autobiographical, personal narrative as the only 'authentic' topic, and insofar as a focus on personal writing did not effectively allow them access to 'codes' and literacy practices of the university disciplines other than those they encountered in the writing course (Berlin, 1988). In any case, it appears that the proliferation of pedagogical approaches to the teaching of writing is matched by a proliferation of approaches to selecting content to focus on in writing programs. As Seitz (2005) notes in his contribution to a collection of essays focused on the 'content' problem in composition,

> the result of [an] emphasis on practice and process is a curriculum in which subject matter has been deemed largely irrelevant [...] students are invited to read and write about family or work or media or government or history or sports or cultural theory or the environment or anything under the sun, and the reason is because, however much one teacher may prefer this subject to that , the field as a whole presumes that subject matter, at least, in the first-year course, doesn't matter (p.26).

This portrait of the field as eclectic and arbitrary, and 'unconcerned' about the question of content is somewhat of a caricature. At least one significant movement has sought to address the challenge by suggesting a radical reinvention of the first year writing curriculum. Building on 'disciplinary discourses', genre and 'situated' literacy perspectives that recognise the 'necessity of learning genres in context' (Wardle, 2009, 766) as well as a recognition of the diversity of literacy practices across the disciplines of the university, a group of researchers and teachers have argued that the only legitimate content for writing classes should be writing itself. Under the banner of 'Writing about Writing', (see eg. Adler-Kassner, 2012; Downs & Wardle, 2007; Wardle, 2009; Wardle & Downs, 2011) this movement rejects a purely 'skills' based curriculum on the grounds that it is based on a flawed construct that writing can be reduced to a set of 'generic' skills. However, in accepting that writing has to be about 'something' in particular and always takes place in a particular context, they have also challenged the 'eclectic' approach to content. The grounds for this objection is that to teach anything other than 'writing' (in short, teaching 'concepts' of writing and language such as those outlined above) as the content in a writing course is to 'undermine' the field's own claims to disciplinary expertise and validity as a discipline in its own right (Adler-Kassner, 2012, p.134).

In any case, the question of content, and the related issues of engagement and transfer outlined in this overview of North American writing pedagogy continue to be key questions for Writing teachers. The present research, accordingly, focused on how practitioners in a variety of contexts tackled them.

4. Methodology

While the considerable research literature available on composition pedagogy in North America suggests that we could learn all there is to know about the field from published sources, learning 'how things actually are' for practitioners and students adds a valuable dimension. The aims of the study to identify some conceptions of the 'challenges' faced by student writers; to hear from individual teachers and students about the kinds of approaches that they felt engaged students, or put them off; and the approaches or strategies staff and students felt helped or hindered transfer of learning from the writing class to studies more generally. Overall, the interviews tried to identify how various 'principles' or 'theories' translated (or were modified) in practice. The phenomenographic approach taken in this paper thus was selected in order to capture more of the realities and diversity of practice from both student and staff perspectives. As Marton summarises: "Phenomenography is a research method adapted for mapping the qualitatively different ways in which people experience, conceptualise, perceive, and understand various aspects of, and phenomena in, the world around them" (Marton, 1986, p. 31).

As with any method, there are limitations to the interview and phenomenography more generally. A specific critique of phenomenography is that it emphasises the interview over observation (see Moore, 2011). It is acknowledged, in terms of the specific research area of interest here--teaching and learning of writing--that an interview with either a student or practitioner takes place outside of the actual context of teaching, learning or 'doing' writing and that additional research focused on the products of writing classes (essays) would be of benefit.

The interpretative procedure consisted of recognising patterns of meaning within and across interviewees, understanding the sense of participants' comments, identifying 'gaps' or inconsistencies and noting points of particular import. Finally, the conduct of the interviews as well as interpretation is guided in ethical terms, by a commitment to representing the 'truth' of the participants' comments accurately and sympathetically.

4.1. Participants and contexts

Seven academic staff and 8 students from three different programs and institutions teaching academic writing were interviewed over the course of six weeks in the first half of 2017. The selection of institutions was based in part with a view to capturing aspects of variety in the type of program offered. One of the institutions was a large public university offering a range of generic writing classes (though credit bearing) as electives, one was a much smaller private institution with a compulsory writing requirement (and as emerged through the research, a distinctive pedagogical vision for the program) and the third was a state (public) university but with a long history placing it among the 'elite' institutions in the system. The writing program here featured a mixture of compulsory and elective writing classes with choice for students in 'content' and focus. Given that there are over two thousand universities in the US alone, and as such, that it would have been difficult to gain any kind of representative sample of even a 'fraction' of the diverse programs on offer; the selection was also based on convenience and availability. Within the institutional settings, the choice of participants was driven, in the case of staff, to an extent by availability in the research period, but primarily by seeking out those staff most involved in introductory, or generic writing classes. All staff interviewed were currently, or recently teaching in first year credit bearing academic writing courses. The selection of student participants was done by invitation and followed from the selection of staff interviewees in that invitations were sent to students engaged in the classes taught by the staff interviewed. All students interviewed were enrolled in first year credit bearing academic writing courses, as a compulsory part of their degree - students may not have determined a major, but identified a range of degrees, disciplines as 'interest' areas. Interviews were conducted on site at one institution in Western Canada, and two institutions in the Eastern United States.

In each of the three cases staff were interviewed either in their own offices or a temporary office opened to the researcher for the period. Students were interviewed in classrooms or study spaces on University campuses. Demographic variables of age, gender, nationality, or ethno-cultural background of the participants (staff and students) were not considered as significant in this research, so this information was not collected. In relation to language background; moreover, it was clear from interactions in the interview space that whether first or additional language, all participants were fluent speakers of English.

Table 1. Student Participants.

Country context	Pseudonym	Code	Major / discipline (actual or likely)
Canada	Mark	CA-S1	Psychology
Canada	Jen	CA-S2	Law
Canada	Kate	CA-S3	Law / social work
Canada	Stephanie	CA-S4	Management
Canada	Zoe	CA-S5	Social work
USA - Private	Nina	US-S1	Psychology / Medicine
USA - Private	Anne	US-S2	Chemical Engineering
USA - Private	Ben	US-S3	Economics

Table 2. Staff participants.

Country context	Pseudonym	Code	Disciplinary background
Canada	Isabel	CA-A1	Writing and discourse
Canada	Amy	CA-A2	Professional writing
Canada	Sarah	CA-A3	Rhetoric
USA - Private	Paul	US-A1	Literature
USA - Private	Kim	US-A2	Literature / cultural studies
USA - Public	Emma	US-A3	Creative writing / fiction
USA - Public	James	US-A4	Creative writing / poetry

4.2. The interview and analysis

A semi-structured interview – using a set of content mining and content mapping open-ended questions (see Legard, Keegan, & Ward, 2003) – was conducted with each interviewee, or in some cases with a small group (comprising three and two students). Interview schedules (list of questions used in the interview) are provided as Appendix A: Staff interview schedule, and Appendix B: Student interview schedule. The different questions asked for student and staff participants reflected expectations of their different experience and assumed knowledge. All interviews were recorded, and a written transcript produced for further review. The analysis of the interviews followed procedures outlined in phenomenographic research literature (e.g. Prosser et al., 2005, pp. 140-141) with an initial analysis identifying key themes and grouping quotations around the three identified 'challenges' (inspiring, linking and transfer) (see Braun & Clarke, 2008). To avoid issues of bias a second, independent reader reviewed transcripts, identifying themes and selecting quotes related to the identified themes. Discussion between first and second reader of relevance of selected materials and identification of additional themes followed. Drafts of the written discussion of the interview results were analysed by the independent reviewer with a view to noting omissions or adjusting interpretations. Analysis of the staff responses focused on any comments

from staff that explicitly referenced theories of writing pedagogy, or to responses that suggested specific awareness of alternative approaches and a 'weighing' of alternatives. Analysis of student interviews focused more on the extent to which their perceptions of the curriculum reflected any of the 'conscious' interests, decisions or 'principles' of their teachers, and perhaps, even more interested in those responses which suggested students had not necessarily 'shared' the preoccupations or interests of the curriculum.

5. Results

The aim of this study, as already noted, was to capture the individual and subjective perspectives of those involved in teaching and learning academic writing in credit based writing 'units', or to focus on differences. However, it is also the aim of the present study to identify common issues and perspectives across the different institutional settings. The presentation of the results that follows groups the interview responses according to the three main curricular challenges identified in part through the literature review of engagement, linking and transfer, and subsequently confirmed through the interview analysis. Additional themes or points of interest that arise around or outside the themes are also discussed.

As suggested in the preceding literature review the challenge of content and curriculum design in academic writing programs has three main aspects: these include firstly, attention to student engagement or inspiring students to be engaged in the process of writing in an academic context. A key finding across the interviews as detailed below was that approaches that balance student interests and autonomy with the need for 'guidance', 'scaffolding' or 'direction' of student enquiry resonated with students and reflected principles of writing pedagogy for staff. In relation to the issues of linking and transfer, it appears through the interviews that the two issues are difficult to separate, with students both looking forward to what kind of writing they will be engaged in the future, but also still carrying the experience and expectations from prior writing experience. Staff also seemed very aware of designing curriculum that recognised the particular challenges students faced as a product of prior education, but also determined to make the writing course 'content' relevant to other fields of study or interests of students, or consideration of teaching strategies to enable 'transfer'. The final part of the results and discussion will return to the issue of transfer and linking, but begins in a sense by focusing on developing a deeper understanding of how both staff and students perceived the challenge of teaching and learning writing in an academic context.

5.1. Curriculum foundations: the 'perception' of challenges

Two key considerations in designing curriculum for academic writing programs that will link to students' prior experience of learning and writing are the 'construct' of what constitutes academic literacy (Johns, 1997 p. 3) and also an understanding of the difficulties or challenges students need to overcome to develop 'it'. The assumption that academic literacy is not a simple 'extension' of everyday literate activity (say, the basics of reading and writing) and therefore not something that students can be expected to have developed in prior schooling has informed the field of composition and rhetoric over many years. But within the field there remain differences in terms of the 'perception' or construct of what challenges need to be addressed and how to address them. While it may have been on the wane even 30 years ago, the 'current-traditional' (Berlin, 1987) approaches centred on grammar, form, style or structure of essays outside of or 'irrespective' of the disciplinary context in which students are writing appear to remain a part of rhetoric and composition classrooms and teaching. But perhaps even more significant than a few isolated instances of writing teachers rejecting newer theoretical perspectives, or being unaware of them, some of the underlying assumptions that inform a current traditional approach (the assumption that writing is largely a 'mechanical' process of transcribing thoughts into text; that student difficulties with writing or 'errors' are a result of not 'knowing' or not 'following' the basic and unchanging rules of syntax, or essay structure, for instance) seem to remain very much the 'public'

understanding of writing. This is evidenced by public calls for reintroduction of traditional approaches to grammar at all levels of education, or the 'back to basics' movement, or in public 'complaints' about the standard of graduates' communicative abilities, and employer, government or 'internally driven' moves within Higher Education institutes to focus on students' 'generic skills'. (Adler-Kassner, 2012).

It is not surprising therefore, to hear an echo of these assumptions in some students' account of the challenges they face, the purpose of academic writing classes they are enrolled in, or 'what they are focusing on' in academic writing programs. Among the students I interviewed, comments that seemed to suggest a formalist understanding of their 'task' included one to the effect that in a typical class they might spend: '*five minutes on topic, and the rest on writing. It's mostly about how to put forth your ideas rather than the ideas* (Mark, CA-S1) or the comment of another student in the same course: '*structure, that's the main thing, it's structure*' (Jen CA-S2). Mark and Jen were, it must be noted, in a subject that most appeared to reflect a 'current traditional' pedagogy, as suggested by their teacher's focus on 'skills' and form:

> *Where they are weak is in grammar skills and in formulating essays ... the three areas of teaching all weave together, critical thinking, grammar, writing skills or essay format.*

> (Amy CA-A2)

A group interview with three older students in the same program (all of whom were returning to study after diverse work and learning experience) revealed a much more complex picture. While talking about the benefits and focus of the academic writing program their responses confirmed a clear attention to form, structure, style. Discussion of the challenges they faced revealed more attention to 'topic', analysis, evidence and shifting from a 'narrative' form of communication with which they felt comfortable, to the analytical and argumentative expectations they understood were 'required' to succeed in university:

> *– I think we're really good at narrative...*

> *– narrative, yes ...*

> *– like through experience. We're excellent at writing what we've experienced but when it comes to critical analysis or argumentative...or giving our opinion on something, and I always come back into narrative. Like even just the one I just got back [referring to an essay returned with a low mark] I was trying to discuss something, and like I threw it into the narrative, back into an analysis, and it just doesn't jibe. You go off topic and then you come back to it.*

> (Kate CA-S3 & Stephanie - CA-S4).

The staff member's perspective on students in this program was that on the whole, they were *'good critical thinkers'.* The contrast is that that while some students felt their difficulties in holding to a particular analytical structure and staying focused on the 'argument' reflected difficulties with thinking analytically, staff regarded this as more an issue of having a viable 'structure' through which to 'organise thought' than *thinking* as such. The apparent disjunction can be understood in terms of the possibility that students may always have a different view of what they are expected to learn and see their courses through the lens of their own prior learning and expectations, and future goals (see Marton et al. 1986). Nevertheless, it seems clear that the the design of curriculum goals, and the ways in which staff conceive of the 'learning challenges' to be addressed to achieve this goal may be reflected in student perceptions of the learning work they are engaged in. Comments by students about what staff 'imparted' or helped them to do, seem to reflect staff conceptions of student difficulties:

> *our professors really great at bringing in examples of the techniques we can effectively use ... He brings in previous content from other classes that he's*

taught, with their permission. He shows us mistakes or strengths that were present in other students' writing'

<div align="right">(Anne - US-S2)</div>

However, apart from one staff participant in Canada, teachers of academic writing suggested they paid little attention to formalistic academic writing pedagogies, or did not see these as areas of difficulty for students. Instead, most of the staff interviewed conceived of the challenges (and hence, the likely focus and aim of course and curriculum design) as issues of understanding, making sense of a different mode of enquiry, of complexity and their own role as something more than 'student writers' or writing for assessment:

The problem actually stems from the challenge of reading scientific papers. Depending on the topic they might be immersed in […] they might be trying to negotiate their way through four or five very dense academic papers […] but students don't have any experience reading academic papers, so you're struggling with complex content and then as a student you're forced to make connections, to bring it down to a level that makes sense to you.

<div align="right">(Isabel - CA-A1)</div>

Moving from a model where you're being told what to write [...] and the authority that's guiding your question is somebody else's, in other words your teacher is asking you to write an assignment [...] to the big shift which is you need to make a case for why what you're writing about is important.

<div align="right">(Paul, US-A1)</div>

What these responses also suggest is that staff are conscious of bringing to the fore ideas about 'disciplinary' discourses, or the different 'epistemological' values that underpin modes of writing:

Incoming freshers [first year students] may have no idea that the reasons that they're going to be expected to write in slightly different ways in each department, that there are reasons for that. [...] It comes with all of these assumptions about what counts as knowledge and what we should trust.

<div align="right">(Kim, US-A2)</div>

An intersection between disciplinary epistemologies and a more specific writing 'problem' (the use of 'evidence' or reference to sources and authorities) is hinted at here - corresponding with theoretical perspectives on 'disciplinary discourse'. As Hyland (2004) puts it, 'citation is central to the social context of persuasion' (p. 20). This set of consistent issues emerged from interviews with staff and students alike: the challenge of incorporating sources, integrating other voices (avoiding inappropriate use of source material or plagiarism), and developing a 'voice' of one's own in relation to the material. Both students and staff appeared to understand, as Hyland suggests, a fundamental issue of being a 'researcher' and making and communicating meaning in an academic context is engagement with sources:

the other big shift is research seeing research as an investigative process not a gathering of information. That's a huge, titanic shift. Because they are typically thinking of information as worthy on its own of being passed along and to understand that all this information is being gathered in the service of an argument [...] That's a deep, underlying motive of the course, to help them see this.

<div align="right">(Paul, US-A1)</div>

From the student perspective, Nina went on to demonstrate her understanding that the question of sources goes well beyond any issue of 'the formalities' of academic referencing:

[there's] various ways you can interact with these scholarly texts, and that is the most difficult part for me, is I find these articles, and I'm so very intrigued

by what the writer says, what they have to say about the topic of his or her choice, and it become difficult to distinguish what I want to say about the topic, from what they're already saying particularly when I'm agreeing with the scholar.

(Nina US-S1)

Like Nina, Ben (US-S7) recognises the relationship with sources as a key challenge. Their recognition of the centrality of engagement with sources, or how academic authors negotiate new 'understandings' through this 'conversation' and 'contestation' suggests they have already adopted an academic attitude:

At the end of the day we're using a lens. Or we're using a secondary source in order to back up our information, I feel like, moving in from high school, there's a lot of trouble with integrating secondary sources, as sort of a jumping point for your own writing or inspiration for your own ideas.

(Ben, US-S3).

5.2. Content choices and student engagement

How then do these different perceptions about the challenges students face in developing academic literacy translate into choices about content, or strategies to engage students in the process? In a sense even this small 'sample' seemed to confirm Seitz's point that writing courses can be 'eclectic' when it comes to what students write about. The following topics, were mentioned by staff as something they had taught in the past or were currently teaching, or were identified by students as the ostensible 'subject' (or theme) of their classes other than 'writing' itself: civil rights, neuroscience, puppeteering, photography, food (politics and culture), childhood, subcultures, style, 'ways of knowing', racism, and genocide. In addition to these 'content' based courses, staff also identified they had taught courses which gave students more freedom to design their own 'research' or come up with their own topics within a framework of focusing on an aspect of 'writing', such as a first-year course which asked students to investigate a 'discourse' community and 'personal literacy narrative'. This latter course was explicitly identified as based in the writing about writing approach, as Emma (a teacher with a background in creative writing) put it:

The content is how writing works, my 1510 [course code] is 'fiction vs non-fiction' we look at how various clashes of social forces are looked at in fiction vs. non-fiction.

(Emma, US-A3)

Though this instance was the only one studied to explicitly reference a writing 'pedagogy' grounded in discourse theories, it was clear that within particular writing programs at an institution there were 'unifying' principles. For instance, at the private US university, a focus on authorial 'motive' was noted by both staff and students as a core idea. The diverse 'content' choices available to students, moreover, was driven by a 'program' wide insistence that writing courses '*have to have some interdisciplinary quality*' (Paul, US-A1). Similarly, at the public US university the notion of 'enquiry' as the central purpose and 'focus' of the writing courses was evident. But while there are aspects of 'academic' writing linked to the notion of 'enquiry', the actual purpose of the writing course is not limited to preparing students for the academic writing demands they would encounter in their disciplines. As James (not only a teacher of writing but also an associate director of the writing program) explained, their purpose is:

Not to make them better university writers, but to make them better lifelong writers [...] to [help them to] think about themselves as writers.

(James, US-A4)

Regardless of broader purpose, it was also clear that content selection, or the approach to 'content' in all programs had an underlying rationale of engaging students, and was directed by a strong sense that, contra Seitz (2005), the subject matter did make a difference:

> *The most important thing is that they, to me the priority is to get to subjects that really matter to them, that it's easier to get them to see how they would really matter, you know, that it would be useful for them to figure this out [...] this thing that matters in their own life, where they are at as 18 year olds.*
>
> (Kim, US-A2)

In terms of content selection, Kim also showed awareness of some of the potential 'tensions' between engaging learners and challenging them,

> *yes, and then you're balancing the desire to put them through an experience of actually finding out how complex something is, and then being able to figure out how to carve out something that they can say.*
>
> (Kim, US-A2)

The problem to which Kim alludes here is that students can struggle to write well about difficult topics due to the limits of their current knowledge, as opposed to the limits of their writing skills *per se*. This is a problem that has been widely acknowledged in academic literacies literature (see eg. Hounsell, 1984; Taylor, 1988; Lea & Street, 1999) as well as in pedagogical theory going back as far as the educational psychologist Vygotsky's recognition of the link between 'thought and language' (1920, 1986), and into more recent theories of learning such as Meyer and Land's (2006) notion of threshold concepts. The 'tension', nonetheless, is to avoid simply 'imposing' a subject matter on students and treating it as a 'fixed' matter without 'scope' for students to explore, discover or 'construct' their own perspective and interests within it, as Isabel (CA-A10) notes:

> *The students feel like there's room for them to develop, to make an argument, whereas in other ways they might just feel like they're gathering information and repackaging it and presenting it.*

The balance between autonomy and direction may be struck, first of all by allowing them to 'select' a more general topic area and then allowing students to determine their own 'focus' within that (though also sometimes giving quite specific direction), as the following comments indicate:

> *No, I just say, anything to do with your field, so for nursing students it could be anything to do with nursing, or anything to do with health, or with health care. Occasionally a student will write to me to say they have a special interest in X, can I write about X, and I usually say yes. I like to see students engaged in their tasks*
>
> (Isabel, CA-A1)

> *we can pretty much pick anything as it pertains to childhood and perceptions about it,*
>
> (Ben, US-S3)

> *We had this long essay where we looked at transitional objects, attachment to blankets or teddy bears. How these topics have significant value in research [...] it's kind of helped us as far as helping us to develop a style, where you're given a topic and then can just really think about your writing, itself, and what elements need to be present in the writing.*
>
> (Nina, US-S1)

> *I give them a lot of freedom so that they do care about it, in terms of what*
> *they can or can't do*

(Emma, US-A3)

Students in US programs that differentiated the writing program into discrete 'topic' areas (each led by a different teacher with expertise in that topic) appeared to appreciate the choice. However, there did not appear to be significantly less 'enthusiasm' or engagement in a course that more generally tackled current or historically significant social issues, but did not give students a choice about this 'up front':

> *They give us various, a variety of topics […] So you're writing about issues*
> *that matter to you* [...] *I can't stop reading, this class has really grasped*
> *me, like, I can't stop reading, it's so interesting.*

(Zoe, CA-S5).

Perhaps the most consistent comment from staff in various types of programs was that engagement came from a 'student-centred' approach to the topics and themes they were asked to write about, fitting with Graff's (2002) argument that we need to be more attuned to student's attitudes to intellectual culture in order to bridge the gap. As James (US-A3) put it: "they can always develop when they can connect it to their lives." Confirming this idea, as well as Friedman's (2013) sense that students do value exploration, without a sense of pragmatic, vocational, or even academic purpose in relation to their 'major', a student in a course focused on 'childhood' offered this striking comment on the value of diverse subject matter in the writing course:

> *My first choice was imagining childhood… because, personally, felt like,*
> *I didn't give myself much of a childhood, so I thought I should attempt to*
> *re-visit that*

(Anne, US-S2)

5.3. Transfer

Regardless of the content focus in a particular course, and regardless of how well students might be engaged by that content, or by the freedom to 'find' their own course within a writing 'requirement', the question of how the knowledge or practices developed in a writing course might be 'transferred' to other learning or 'work' situations is a persistent one. As already noted, the possibility of transfer is complicated by the fact that there is rarely just 'one' context that writing teachers or students are thinking of when designing curriculum. And as Sarah (CA-A3) who largely taught in a 'professional writing' context suggests, the aim of a course may not be exclusively related to written discourse:

> *as much opportunity as I can get I try and set them up to mimic that profes-*
> *sional world so any kind of group, we talk lots about collaborative learning*
> *[…] workplace etiquette, how to communicate with people in the workplace.*

For some, the sense that it is essential to have a balance in courses between developing understanding of a particular topic and working on aspects of writing is important. Nina (US-S1) outlined how this worked in her class:

> *We have some classes where we spend more time on one than the other, so*
> *early in the year when we were learning about motive, what's the motive of*
> *your paper we spent the majority of that class exploring motive […] we spent*
> *a lot of the class discussing the book itself, and analysing the literature, and*
> *not so much exploring how we're supposed to write about it yet*

(Nina, US-S1)

Other students highlighted more 'general' points in response to questions about what they would be able to 'apply' of what they had learned in academic writing classes, such as Amy (CA-A2) who thought it was the '*clarity of how you lay out your argument*, (Amy, CA-A2) or Jen who focused on 'practice': *Practicing - that's a huge one. You don't have to memorise anything but practicing* (Jen, CA-S2). For some, it is possible that simply paying more attention to the process and complexities of writing is valuable in itself: '*I didn't realise there was so much to writing until this class'.* (Stephanie, CA-S4). The idea that there might be some way to 'separate' the generic writing skills from more specific 'disciplinary' capacity or understanding was still present in the ways some staff spoke about the issues of transfer:

> *I guess what I think the course equips them with is not the genre knowledge,*
> *but it's how to ask good questions, if they have that ability in an assignment*
> *how to do library research, how to assess if a source is credible, how to write*
> *effectively with sources, how to document sources, build arguments and how*
> *to express themselves effectively in terms of style, grammar, expression, tone,*
> *all of those kinds of things.*

> (Isabel - CA-A1)

On more careful reading this response is mixed, both highlighting a conceptual and 'content' related function of asking good questions as having greater impact than the learning of 'specific' genre knowledge (which might be taken to include the generic stylistic and structural features noted after) and nevertheless affirming that the course might provide them.

Specific transfer may also be an achievable goal where the writing program is well integrated into the whole of the students' curriculum and stretches across multiple faculties and across the years of a degree. In the context of a writing program that was designed as part of a progression from introductory academic writing to 'senior thesis' (in a discipline based research project) there appeared to be a stronger sense of transferable knowledge of 'academic' conventions for some students:

> *It's quite clear they're preparing you for academic writing. And the thesis is*
> *the epitome of what some students might do while they're here, so it just*
> *makes sense that it's preparing them for that thesis.*

> (Emma, US-S4)

> *what I learned here as far as establishing my thesis, knowing my motive and*
> *learning how to read such things, making sure my sources are peer reviewed,*
> *what that means.*

> (Nina, US-S1)

Doubtless, the mention of 'motive' would please the programs' staff who are less concerned, it appears, with some of the conventional aspects of academic discourse such as referencing.

> *we look at many different ways that people from all the main three branches*
> *of academia and the social sciences and humanities are making motivated*
> *arguments right up front*

> (Paul, US-A1)

As already noted, where one US program focused on 'motive', the other focused on enquiry. Perhaps it is not surprising then to discover that these 'terms' are seen, by staff in the respective institutions as the key points for students to 'take away' from writing classes.

> *They're trained in secondary school to pounce on an answer when they find*
> *it...enquiry is a way to 'frustrate' this being 'satisfied' with an answer.*

> (James, US-A4)

Overall, in line with the different conception of student difficulties, it seemed that staff in programs focused on 'topics' or with more of a defined 'content' basis for curriculum (eg. the choice of topics) focused on broad rhetorical practices (enquiry and motive) or attitudinal shifts (seeing oneself as a writer, for instance) as the 'content' of a course that might be transferred. Most interestingly, this 'perception' accords in some surface respects with both a progressivist notion of the value of writing as a transformative and liberating practice, but also with a 'Writing about Writing' pedagogy that sees the function of 'writing' courses as raising awareness and understanding of discourse and language.

A final comment from one of the students serves as a reminder that whatever strategy is employed, or whatever 'principles' are identified to support this strategy in favour of another, students must be enabled to make 'connections' for themselves and find meaning in their own writing. Though their motivations for participating and engaging actively in writing courses may tend toward the immediate necessity of writing effective 'assignments', such courses seem to have clear value for students extending beyond the pragmatic:

> *once you start with a thesis and then maintain that point throughout, that's the key that I found as far as getting better grades on my essays and better feedback from my classmates and my professor, and just for myself knowing what I am saying, what I have to say about the subject.*

(Nina, US-S1)

6. Discussion and conclusion

The primary aim of this research has been to develop a deeper awareness of the challenges of developing curriculum for academic writing classes, extending beyond the theoretical debates and discussions about pedagogy into the actual experience of teaching and learning in a sample of North American institutions. For Australian practitioners who are engaged or will be engaged in the future in the development of such curriculum it is instructive to learn more about the difficulties as well as the successful approaches undertaken in a system with a much longer history of teaching writing in this form. The key results of the interviews confirm that staff and students share a concern about the curriculum choices and can be motivated or 'inspired' by stimulating content, though different approaches to selecting content can be effective. This seems in part to challenge the position of some who advocate that the only effective approach to teaching writing is to focus on writing itself (Wardle & Downs, 2005).

Given that many of the theories and concepts around which a 'writing studies' curriculum might be built (such as 'genre') are inherently political, acknowledging an ideological dimension to language in use, and most interesting when responding to recent controversies, it is not clear how far this strategy might extend. Others have argued that a diverse and 'disruptive' curriculum is not only 'appropriate', but essential as a means of 'resisting' or challenging the drift of higher education toward 'technicist' or 'vocational' preparation (Friedman, 2013). Friedman's point seems to have been echoed by the student interviewee Anne (US-S2) who responded strongly to an opportunity to study something she had not previously had the 'luxury' to study.

Nevertheless the interviews reported here focus attention on the critical issue of linking and transfer. Given that assumptions about the purpose and value of writing courses are not only made by 'naive' students at the point of enrolling in university but also be administrators, faculty in other disciplines depending on the writing program to support student learning, not to mention by the culture at large, the challenge of 'shifting perceptions' of the goal, purpose and value of such courses is significant. The interviews conducted for this study suggested nevertheless that the aim of transfer remains a priority for at least some writing teachers. For Australian practitioners the vital sense gathered from these interviews with students and staff could be that while different approaches can be successful, none in itself is likely to be a 'magic bullet' and adjusting the approach to the particular cohort enrolled is important. Above all, the clear impression gathered

from this set of interviews confirms a view expressed in the literature (see Seitz, 2005) that content *does* matter.

As Prosser et al. (2005, p.153) argue, 'to change and develop the ways in which teachers approach their teaching and help their students to learn we need to help them to think carefully about what they are teaching and how it relates to and coheres with the field as a whole'. Thus, another aim of this paper has been to expand the horizons of ALL practitioners to a wider field. Through identifying the differences and similarities in the institutional placement of academic literacy it is possible to recognise the different challenges that may arise from any move toward developing academic literacy in cross-disciplinary, and credit bearing units. At the same time, the North American experience suggests that there are many advantages and benefits to be realised from teaching within a 'course' structure, and standing as a 'discipline' in its own right.

This study of North American approaches to teaching writing in academic contexts has only begun to scratch the surface. There is scope for much further research. In particular, longitudinal studies comparing students who have participated in first year composition programs with specific content, and students who have only had writing instruction within their discipline, or had none at all could show the extent to which writing knowledge is transferred. Similarly, a study focused on the extent to which theoretical perspectives on writing and literacy are 'evident' in observed teaching practice, or reflected in specific written exemplars and in the experience of students would provide a still clearer picture of how curriculum design could proceed.

Nevertheless, language and learning practitioners in Australia are demonstrably well-versed in the kind of theoretical perspectives on discourse and genre upon which advanced writing curriculum could be based (Taylor, 2014). They are also to some extent unburdened by the disciplinary traditions of English, literature and civics that have informed some aspects of content selection in the composition curriculum in North America. Australia may provide a receptive environment for contemporary, theoretically informed and pedagogically 'tested' approaches such as those outlined in this study. Equally, as ALL practitioners with their own traditions and 'lived experience' of teaching writing at university, they might well be able to develop a unique offering even more well suited to the climate.

Acknowledgments

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Appendix A. Staff interview schedule

Research Project (institution / ethics no.)

Teaching Academic Writing: issues and concepts

chief investigator: _____

<u>STAFF</u> questions

I'd like to start by finding out a bit more about the class/course/subject/unit you teach -

- is it compulsory or 'required' for any students?
- Does it offer 'credit' toward the completion of the degree?
- Do you have assessment tasks for credit?
- what sorts of things do students do in these assessment tasks?
- Where do the students in your course/classes come from (in terms of their other studies at University).

What, in your view, are the most significant challenges that students face in learning to write academically?

How do you select or identify 'topics' or questions for students to address in your writing classes?

(and/or to what extent do you give students 'freedom' to choose what they write about?)

How much time in class (or outside) would you spend in a semester focusing on 'learning' about the topic/content vs. learning about academic writing styles/structures?

Do some topics or questions work better than others? (if yes, why?)

What do you do, if anything, to help students to apply what they learn in your classes/course to their other studies?

Appendix B. Student interview schedule

Research Project (Institution / ethics approval no.)

Teaching Academic Writing: issues and concepts

chief investigator: _____

interview schedule.

.**STUDENT** questions

I'd like to start by finding out a bit more about the class/course/subject/unit in Academic writing you are taking

- is it compulsory or 'required' for you to take? (if not, why did you choose it?)
- Does it offer 'credit' toward the completion of your degree?
- Do you have assessment tasks for credit?
- what sorts of things do you do in these assessment tasks?
- What is your main field of study – (what's your major?).

What's the hardest thing about academic writing for you? (what do you find most challenging?)

What 'topics' or questions do you write about in your academic writing class?

(to what extent did you get to choose the 'focus' in the content of your tasks?)

How much did you know about these 'topics' before you took this class?

How much time in class (or outside) is focused on 'learning' about the topic/content you are writing about vs. learning about academic writing styles/structures?

What's the most important thing to do, in order to do well in your academic writing tasks (in this subject, or in general)

From what you've learned or are learning in your academic writing class, what do you think you will be able to apply in your other studies?