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Writing for transition: The role of food studies in the general academic writing classroom

Abstract

Consistent with ongoing efforts to improve the transition of students to university, this article conceptualises the general academic writing classroom as a potentially complex but productive pedagogic space. Those who design and deliver curricula in academic writing face particular challenges around translating into practice two principles that are foundational to transitional students' experience: inclusion and engagement. This article presents food studies as a rich interdisciplinary resource for those who strive to construct an inclusive and stimulating learning environment for transitional students of academic writing. It draws on experience in designing and delivering a first-year unit that develops general academic writing skills and involves scaffolded written assessments tasks culminating in the research-based essay. Because such units are taken by students from a range of disciplines, a specific challenge in setting questions for written assessment tasks is to engage all students in such ways that learning experiences are relevant, inclusive and motivating. Questions on food and drink provide common ground for students, and stimulate engagement and inquiry. Supporting and contextualising this argument is scholarship from higher education studies, and scholarship that defines and describes the characteristics of food studies as a field of enquiry. The article extends a body of scholarship, well represented in TEXT, on the synergetic relation between food and writing, and writing pedagogy.

Keywords: academic writing, writing pedagogy, food studies

Introduction

Australian scholarship on teaching and learning has long been concerned with the ways in which students adapt to study at university level. McInnis (2001) notes that a survey on the first-year experience was conducted at the University of Melbourne as early as 1956, and he identifies major landmark studies undertaken since then, as well as the changing context in which they have occurred. The growing diversity of the student population, brought about by the expansion of access to higher education, largely defines that context.

Australian higher education is hardly unique in this regard. The substantial body of US-based scholarship on the first-year experience confirms this (McInnis 2001), as do guides to teaching; for example, Gosling provides a description of the student population in the UK that is both resonant with the Australian context and daunting in the difficulties – for both students and universities – implied. Students have ‘multiple identities which in turn create a multiplicity of learning needs’, and do not necessarily have a shared understanding of the purpose and nature of university study (Gosling 2009:

113). Moreover, diversity extends to students' 'preparedness to engage with the curriculum, pedagogy and the conventions of the courses in which they have enrolled' (Horstmanshof & Brownie 2013: 61). Qualitatively different types of 'study philosophy' have been linked with identifiable cohorts of students (Alauddin & Ashman 2014). People from low socio-economic backgrounds who are entering higher education face particular challenges in becoming integrated in academic culture (McKay & Devlin 2014). Wherever and however manifest, such diversity brings with it challenges for those who design and deliver first-year curricula.

A response to these challenges in the Australian environment but with wider application is Kift's 'Articulating a Transition Pedagogy to Scaffold and to Enhance the First Year Student Learning Experience in Australian Higher Education, the report of a research project undertaken during a fellowship' (2009) conducted under the auspices of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council. It includes the two-page 'Articulating a transition pedagogy: first year curriculum principles', which, in setting out 'interconnected organising principles' (Kift 2009: 40) for first-year curriculum design, foregrounds diversity. It states that the curriculum should be 'attuned to student diversity and ... be accessible by, and inclusive of, all students', bearing in mind 'that students have special learning needs by reason of their social, cultural and academic transition' (Kift 2009: 41). Another principle closely related to accessibility and inclusiveness is that of engagement, which should be manifest through 'learning, teaching, and assessment approaches' that 'enact an engaging and involving curriculum pedagogy and ... enable active and collaborative learning' (Kift 2009: 41).

By taking Kift's principles of inclusiveness and engagement as its starting point, this article conceptualises the academic writing classroom as a pedagogic space that presents distinctive challenges as well as opportunities for those who design and deliver curricula. Behind the very concept of 'engagement', it must be said, is a body of literature that illustrates the complexity, and even problematic nature, of the term despite its widespread use in scholarly, governmental and institutional contexts (Baron & Corbin 2012). That complexity must be acknowledged, along with the merits of taking a broader, institutionally-based approach to engagement as advocated by Baron and Corbin (2012); nevertheless, the efforts of individual teachers have been directly related to the level and quality of student engagement, as illustrated by Umback and Wawrzynski (2005) (cited in Baron & Corbin 2012: 760).

More specifically, this article argues that the integration of food studies into the academic writing classroom is one strategy for translating into pedagogic practice both the general concern to cater for diversity and the specific principles advocated by Kift (2009). In advancing this argument, the article extends a body of scholarship in *TEXT* that highlights the synergetic relation between food and writing (Brien & Wessell 2014; Brien & Wessell 2013; Wessell & Brien 2010) and, moreover, the relation between writing about food and teaching creative or nonfiction writing (for example, Brien 2014; Costello 2010). This article, however, addresses itself primarily to those who design and deliver stand-alone units in academic writing intended to have trans-disciplinary application. In these units, diversity extends beyond students' backgrounds and prior learning to their disciplinary 'home' at university. The article begins with an explication of the nature of the academic writing classroom as a multi-discipline community of learners and the pedagogic challenges that arise as a consequence, before it identifies those aspects of food studies conducive to engaging students in academic writing generally and assessment tasks specifically. In doing so, it draws not only on relevant literature from higher education studies and food studies but also on a

qualitative case study of ENCO100 The Craft of Academic Writing offered by University of New England (UNE), Australia. The case study is used for its instrumental interest – its capacity ‘to provide insight into an issue’ – rather than for its intrinsic interest (Stake 2005: 445).

The general academic writing classroom as pedagogic space

‘Academic writing’ is a broad term encompassing distinctive, if related, discourse communities, which prompts clarification of the nature of the classroom upon which this article is predicated. Kaldor and Rochecouste (2002) distinguish between ‘expert’ academic writing, which is produced for scholarly publications, and ‘student’ academic writing, which is modelled on expert academic writing but produced for assessment purposes. They also distinguish between general academic writing, which has characteristics common to all disciplines, and discipline writing, which has more specialised conventions and language along with identifiable pedagogies directed towards the formation of what have been called ‘disciplinary habits of mind’ (Chick, Haynie & Gurung 2012; Gurung, Chick & Haynie 2009). Haswell, however, claims that ‘general writing skills exist only in the abstract’ because writing is always discipline-based, with specific requirements ranging from punctuation details to the use of evidence (Haswell 2008: 340). Any curriculum is, in Haswell’s view, ‘a site’ that is ‘highly constructed’ within a program and discipline, and when moving between curricula students must adjust their writing accordingly (2008: 340). Capably moving between and inhabiting discipline spaces can be regarded as part of students’ development as writers, a view that has prompted some to question the worth of a general academic writing program in first year (Haswell 2008: 340-341). Yet units in general academic writing, or composition as they are typically known in Northern America, are a common, if not necessarily the only, means of teaching academic writing across Australian universities since the expansion of tertiary education from the 1990s (Skillen 2006). They represent a type of ‘highly constructed’ site within which many students are expected to participate.

The general academic writing classroom can be pedagogically demanding. While the trans-disciplinary nature of units in academic writing may be valued by institutions keen to deliver ‘basic’ instruction as efficiently as possible, its consequence may be a large, multi-discipline cohort lacking the common ground generated for students by enrolment in a discipline-based course or major. Complicating matters is that the prospect of entering the academic discourse community daunts some students. Boone, in reflecting on how ‘to teach basic writers to enter academic discourse and work across disciplinary borders’, draws attention to the phenomenon of the ‘damaged writer’ – the student who is pessimistic about, or even resistant to, undertaking instruction in academic writing (Boone 2010: 227). Reda observes that some students’ perception of themselves as ‘good writers’ at school does not continue into university (Reda 2009: 124-125). Anxiety around writing may focus on the essay, the capable production of which is typically the objective of units in general academic writing and a mark of citizenship in the academic discourse community. That the essay intimidates most students, especially first-years and those confronting their first essay, is well recognised (Horstmanshof & Brownie 2013: 62; Krause 2001) and is confirmed by evidence-based findings on students’ evaluations of the motivational value of particular types of assessment tasks (Lizzio & Wilson 2013).

Learning to write for university is a socially situated act. To appropriate the words of Krause, who draws on Rubin (1998), writing for the transitional

student is a process of 'acculturation on the part of the writer' as she or he acquires the literacy demanded at university (Krause 2001: 150). This process begins with the production of the first written assessment task but will succeed only if students inhabit a space supportive of their learning (2001: 150). An abiding question for those who design and deliver general academic writing units is how to construct that space.

One answer, albeit a necessarily limited one in the context of this article, is to stimulate in students a sense of the shared relevance of learning experiences by devising activities, including assessment tasks, based on topics with which all students have some degree of familiarity. Food and drink are advocated as topics especially well-suited to that end; however, the integration of food studies as represented by these topics should occur within a broader, curriculum-based strategy for communicating relevance and establishing common ground.

Relevance and its communication

Relevance as a concept recurs in guides to curriculum design and delivery. Kift advocates first-year curriculum design that 'mediate[s] a relevant, involving and social transition to tertiary academic study' (2009: 40). Drawing on the practices of academics regarded as exemplary teachers, Kember identifies relevance as a fundamental concept in what to teach, and links it to student motivation (Kember 2007: 36-38). The lack of a unifying, discipline-based curriculum for students in the general academic writing classroom, which has already been mentioned, complicates the question of relevance, especially if students' disciplines are vocationally aligned and perceived as 'real world' environments in which academic writing has little usefulness. Further complicating the question of relevance are students' differing motivations for completing an academic writing unit, depending on whether it is mandatory, attempted voluntarily as a means of acquiring or improving academic writing skills either on students' own initiative or on the recommendation of their teachers, or taken as a 'filler' unit that may even be seen as easy option, to meet degree requirements. Against this background, finding and communicating common ground, in terms of relevance, is a strategy for alleviating the alienation students may feel towards the unit and even towards each other and university study generally. It is a strategy that may be implemented at different points in the teaching period and in various ways.

Explaining to students the trans-disciplinary relevance of learning general academic writing is an obvious first step. To illustrate with an example from ENCO100 at UNE, communicating relevance occurs even before teaching commences, when detailed unit information is made available online to all students enrolled in the unit one week before the start of classes. Students are told that the unit:

...provides a working knowledge of written communication skills in an academic context and is suitable for any undergraduate course in the University. ENCO100 is a skills-based unit in composition; that is, it develops skills in formal, academic writing. Its purpose is not to develop knowledge specific to your course (other units will do that); its purpose is to teach you to write well in an academic (university) context, and to use what you learn when you are communicating in other contexts that have the same or similar rules, conventions and objectives. It is important that you understand this, and the

usefulness of ENCO100 to your studies and communication skills generally. (Williamson 2015)

Represented here is an attempt to answer the call for the unequivocal explanation to students of the university environment they have entered and the purpose and relevance of what is taught, which van der Meer (2012) links to equitable participation and suggests is particularly important in first year. Additionally, students are encouraged to imagine themselves within a certain type of discourse community, one that is occupied during their time at university but is relevant to another discourse community beyond it.

Academic writing, therefore, can be introduced to students not only as a fact of university life but also as a specialised form of professional writing that shares characteristics with other types of professional writing beyond university. Relevance may be reiterated in teaching by foregrounding ‘real life’, ‘current issues’ and ‘local examples’ (Kember 2007: 36-38). Taking this approach may result in, for example, the translation of principles of academic writing to ‘current issues’ and ‘local examples’ around the use of jargon and wordiness, to controversial cases of plagiarism involving prominent creative works, and to discriminatory language used by public figures. Students may be encouraged to view the principles of academic writing as being applicable to formal writing more widely, including in less obvious fields such as the creative arts, as advocated by Williamson (2011). This expansive view of relevance may be complemented by the use of written material from diverse professional fields within the academic writing classroom.

However convincing these strategies for communicating relevance may be, the time at which students actively prepare written tasks for assessment is likely to throw the concept of relevance into sharpest relief. This claim is made bearing in mind scholarship confirming that student motivation is closely tied to assessment and modes of engagement with learning (Hoskins & Newstead 2009: 34-35). Donnison and Penn-Edwards demonstrate that the submission of assessment items causes students to draw upon both services and academic resources, leading to ‘a personalised cycle’ of engagement determined by priorities around assessment (Donnison & Penn-Edwards 2012: 12). Another dimension to engagement occurs in units that involve teacher-to-student and peer-to-peer interaction in the drafting of written assessment tasks, a form of interaction shown to be valued by students (Kraus 2001) and which may occur in traditional classrooms or in online in discussion fora in which students read and provide comments on drafts of each others’ work.

Several factors affect students’ success in written assessment tasks. The setting of topics is recognised as one variable, as is providing a choice of topics (Murphy & Yancey 2008: 370). Studies demonstrate a correlation between students’ background knowledge of a topic and the quality of their writing (Murphy & Yancy 2008: 368; Proske & Kapp 2013). Those who assess writing have tended, at least in the case of impromptu, timed tasks, to choose topics based on general knowledge ‘presumed to be accessible to the broadest range of participants’, even though whether these are best suited to all students has been questioned (Murphy & Yancey 2008: 368). Admittedly, criteria for the evaluation of paragraph and essay tasks in the general academic writing unit will be based upon students’ writing skills rather than knowledge of the subject area of the topic; nevertheless, a guiding criterion in setting topics is what will most likely engage a multi-discipline cohort, whether within or outside of the classroom, and as equitably as possible. The approach taken in ENCO100, for example, is to reassure students that ‘we choose topics on which all students can write something regardless of what course they are completing’ (Williamson 2015). For single paragraph tasks, these topics may indeed

represent assumed general knowledge; for essay tasks, these topics may assume a general awareness or knowledge but additionally call for research. All topics should be conducive to students' application of the principles, conventions and techniques of academic writing. They also should be pique interest, conversation and questions. Enter food studies.

Food studies and the academic writing classroom

Using topics from food studies in the general academic writing unit advances the strategy for engendering a sense of relevance and establishing common ground in a pragmatic way. To illustrate once again from ENCO100, assessment predominantly comprises a series of scaffolded writing tasks beginning with a single paragraph and culminating in an essay that develops a coherent argument supported by research from reputable sources. Students routinely are given a choice of assessment topics, the setting of which is influenced by which ones past cohorts of students have chosen, and a sense among colleagues of what topics may reasonably be seen to represent students' shared experiences or interests, including as citizens and consumers. Also remembered is the very generalised but nonetheless worthwhile 'rule' of 'never set an assignment ... question you are not ready to answer yourself' (Ramsden 2003: 205). Because of these considerations, food studies has become a preferred source of topics for assessment tasks and associated activities. ENCO100 as a consequence remains firmly anchored in the discipline of writing, which is reflected in marking criteria for written assessment tasks, but invites food studies into the classroom.

Mention of discipline at this point warrants some explanation of food studies as a named field. Like writing itself, food studies is a 'new' discipline compared to those 'traditional' disciplines with longer lineages. Put simply, it encompasses 'the scholarly study of food and eating' (Cargill 2005: 116). The field arose from questions around the ways in which food is produced and consumed, with 'the various approaches to such questions – historical, cultural, behavioral, biological and socioeconomic ... now often grouped under the rubric food studies' (McIntosh & Nestle 2010: 160). Food studies is widely acknowledged as an interdisciplinary field across the social sciences, the humanities and the natural sciences (Cargill 2005). It also has cross-cultural application: food 'becomes a lens through which we may explore the stratified realities of a society, its ideas about worth, about class, sex-gender, race, religion, and even nationality and humanity' (Bonnekessen 2010: 280). As with similarly named areas, 'studies' connotes the extension or crossing of traditional discipline boundaries.

Represented by topics in the general academic writing classroom, as in ENCO100, food studies is unnamed and unobtrusive – students are not expected to conceptualise topics on food and drink within a discipline framework beyond writing. It is the way in which students are expected to write about these topics that guides practice. To give examples from ENCO100, paragraph or essay tasks have required students to define 'junk food', argue whether or not advertisements for alcoholic drinks should be banned, and discuss the proposition that the production of genetically modified food should be encouraged, all of which are assessed on students' ability to produce coherent and correct pieces of writing in academic style. Even so, an advantage of these topics is that they lend themselves to students making connections with their home disciplines. The selection of key points in response to the question and the location of sources of information may dovetail with students' interests in, for instance, media representations of food

and drink; legal restrictions around, or the sociological and psychological dimensions of the consumption of food and drink; urban and regional planning considerations of the use of the environment, and so on. Conversations on written tasks and the written pieces themselves may, therefore, accommodate differing discipline-based views even if the writing itself remains the foremost concern.

In tracing the history of food studies as a recognisable field, McIntosh and Nestle recall ‘a time when nearly everyone considered food far too common and quotidian to be taken seriously as a field of study, let alone as an agent of social change’ (2010: 161). Hinted at here are two perspectives that are pertinent to the transitional writing student: common ground, the finding of which may ease the transition of students to their university discourse community; and the nature of university study, predicated as it is on higher-order enquiry.

According to Cargill (2005), food is ‘a compelling topic with which to engage students, especially undergraduates, in the learning process because it can serve as a bridge between abstract “ivory tower” ideas and the concrete realities of everyday life’ (2005: 122). The phrase “ivory tower” ideas’ is a reminder that students entering university are expected to participate in a community, and a type of enquiry, that may be perceived as distant from, and even elevated above, what they have experienced previously. Food and drink constitute shared experience and, therefore, common ground. Apart from the truism that everybody eats and drinks, students are likely to have been exposed to food- and drink-related issues of national prominence, whether through public policy or the media. Contemporary examples of such issues are the restriction of the consumption of alcohol, discussions of the adequacy or otherwise of food labelling, the promotion of so-called super-foods and the use of disposable plastic water bottles. Cargill relates the visibility of such matters in the public eye to the ‘specific zeitgeist’ that necessarily gives rise to interdisciplinary fields of study, as in the case of food studies:

The current zeitgeist is that we are now facing a national obesity epidemic. Mad cow disease is a reality in the [sic] Europe and [in] the US globalization has a profound and far-reaching impact on the food supply. Disordered eating is rampant on college and high-school campuses. (2005: 123)

Even though Cargill writes from a US perspective, her comments are transferable to Australia or countries with other, more localised concerns around the production, distribution and consumption of food, and associated concerns around, for instance, environmental degradation, civil rights, globalisation and lifestyle choices.

In terms of higher-order enquiry, topics drawn from food studies elicit the type of thinking that is associated with deep approaches to learning, which are characterised by intensity and quality of engagement with the curriculum rather than pragmatic, minimalist approaches to meeting unit requirements. Donnison and Penn-Edwards, who highlight the link between assessment and first-year students’ motivation, caution that it is unreasonable ‘to expect first year students to *consistently* engage with deep learning’ (2012: 16); furthermore, some learning experiences in academic writing – those around the conventions of grammar, punctuation and referencing, for instance – lend themselves to the more mechanical methods associated with superficial learning, such as memorisation by rote, which can accentuate in students any existing propensity for such learning. Alauddin and Ashman suggest that the challenge for teachers ‘lies in reconciling the two polar opposite philosophical positions: deep

learning and expediency', and that one means of doing so is through the setting of assessment tasks for which thinking is fundamental (2014: 867). In this sense, the first-year writing classroom can be a space within which to introduce the higher-order enquiry expected at university, where students begin to gain new insights into themselves and their world, even if in a limited way.

That spaces for transitional student learning have this potential is already known. McDougall, Holden and Danaher, for example, write about the guiding philosophy of an Academic Language and Learning (ALL) curriculum in a tertiary studies enabling program. Foundational to ALL is 'a pedagogy of hope, where "hope" may be construed as a belief that a different future is possible' (McDougall et al 2012: A59). With reference to Giroux (1997), McDougall et al highlight the transformative potential of education, both individually and collectively, through the provision of spaces in which students can develop their capacities for critical thinking by engaging in dialogue. Fora are created in which students can reflect and share their thoughts on topics with social significance, the effect being that academic writing processes are aligned with 'some of the broader aims of university learning, not all of which can be easily quantified, or justified in economic terms' (2012: A59). This goes to the very heart of what higher education is, or can be, as summed up by McLean in the opening of *Pedagogy and the University*: 'Education is political, cultural and social action' (McLean 2006: 1). For students, higher education is a process of formation, even if its 'value dimensions ... are more likely to inhabit the space of a hidden curriculum' (Sutphen & de Lange 2014: 418).

The 'value dimensions' of the curriculum may seem well and truly hidden in the academic writing classroom. At the pedagogical coalface, as when teaching students the 'basics' of formal writing for academic purposes, achieving higher-order objectives of higher education may seem to be a lofty ideal, but it is an ideal that may be translated into practice at least in part through the setting of assessment topics. As with ENCO100's use of questions about food and drink, in the ALL program 'learning experiences take as their focus various contemporary Australian issues which impact on students' lives' (McDougall et al 2012: A64). Topics for referenced paragraphs include:

the significance of volunteering, changing roles within families, and environmental challenges, all written within an Australian context. The culminating assessment task is a research essay where students are asked to choose from a range of topics, including changing gender roles, the impact of new technologies on society, environmental issues, and social issues such as substance abuse and obesity. (McDougall et al 2012: A64)

ENCO100 at UNE similarly gives students a choice of questions derived from common experiences in, or debates around, contemporary life; for instance, one popular paragraph topic requires students to outline the advantages or disadvantages of daylight saving; one popular essay topic that has incited much discussion, from both sides of the argument, has been whether Australia should retain or abolish compulsory voting in government elections. Other questions require students to construct arguments on aspects of, for instance, public transport, technology and health services. Setting such questions is consistent with what Black (2004) believes should be a fundamental purpose of communication education: the development of ethically informed, responsible citizens.

Questions taken from food studies are, in this respect, by no means unique, but they are especially serviceable not only in their capacity to incite higher-order

enquiry but also from a practical point of view. When devising questions that require students to find, select and use secondary source material, one consideration is the range and availability of sources. Evidence shows that transitional students find the location of sources through electronic databases challenging, yet being able to do so is increasingly required of them (Krause 2001: 155). Here, questions from food studies lend themselves to achieving pedagogic objectives. An established field of literature has arisen around studies of food and drink, with the publication of seminal books and reference works (McIntosh & Nestle 2010) as well as journals spanning a range of disciplines (Cargill 2005: 118). Special issues of Australian journals have had food-related themes, including *Cultural Studies Review* in 2013, *TEXT* in 2014, 2013 and 2010 and *Australian Journal of Adult Learning* in 2012. Moreover, the abundance of published material on food and drink beyond scholarly works, including blogs, magazines and memoirs, provides opportunities for students to learn to distinguish between different types of sources generically and stylistically and, consequently, to hone their skills in selecting sources based on their suitability to the writing task being undertaken.

The model presented here is one in which the integration of food studies into the general academic writing classroom contributes to a strategy for constructing a learning space that is inclusive of, relevant to and formative of its diverse inhabitants. It is, however, a space in which food studies is used selectively rather than one in which food pedagogies are dominant. Flowers and Swan point out that ‘food pedagogies’ is a relatively new term in adult education for formal and informal learning experiences around food. Central to these pedagogies is that food is ‘not only ... an *object* of learning, but it is also a *vehicle* for learning’ (Flowers & Swan 2012: 423). The possibilities inherent in this statement will no doubt be recognised by those who teach writing in genres other than academic, possibilities that are illustrated by Costello’s (2010) relation of her own experience of writing wine reviews to creative nonfiction pedagogy. Food can also be a ‘vehicle for learning’ about academic writing. There, food remains in the service of, and one aspect of, what may be seen as a pedagogy of relevance.

Concluding comment

Integrating food studies into the general academic writing unit is but one of many ways in which two principles fundamental to transitional students’ experience – inclusion and engagement – may be made manifest in curriculum development and classroom practice. There are many and varied influences on the nature and level of student engagement, both within and beyond the curriculum. This is especially so in an environment in which, as in Australia, changes to higher education policy and access have produced greater diversity among the student cohort, and concomitant with that, greater diversity of student approaches to, motivations for and preparedness for university-level study. Drawing on food studies is not, therefore, presented as a panacea for the pedagogic challenges arising from the general academic writing unit, nor is food studies presented as the only interdisciplinary field potentially relevant to the teaching of academic writing. Food studies is, however, presented as an area of particular utility because of its universal relevance and interest, and because it encompasses a wide range of publications – scholarly and other – that may be exploited in the teaching of academic writing. While the study of food and drink will not be the primary focus in the writing curriculum and classroom from a discipline sense, food studies does represent a rich educative resource for those seeking to construct a space conducive to the inclusion,

engagement and formation of the transitional student, and for the stimulation of the higher-order enquiry that will be expected of that student at university.

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TEXT

Vol 20 No 1 April 2016

<http://www.textjournal.com.au>

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