From the Margins to the Centre: Whole-of-Institution Approaches to University-Level Literacy and Language Development in Australia and New Zealand

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The histories and pedagogies surrounding writing and literacy studies in Australasia are complex, given a diversity of theoretical approaches and little consensus on regional (or national) priorities. Writing and literacy are all but invisible disciplines in Australasia, with a focus on remediation rather than anticipating students' literacy needs as an integral aspect of their learning. In contrast, the North American discipline of Rhetoric and Composition is saturated with fine theoretical work ranging from a comprehensive reference guide (McLeod, 2007) and a rhetoric for Writing Program Administrators (Malenczyk, 2016) to works focusing on threshold concepts in writing instruction (Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2015), writing and disciplinarity (Malenczyk, Miller-Cochran, Wardle, & Yancey, 2018), labor and social justice issues in the field (McClure, Goldstein, & Pemberton, 2017; Khan, Lalicker, & Lynch-Biniek, 2017; Inoue, 2015), institutional mission (Janangelo, 2016), reflection in Writing Program Administration (Brown & Enos, 2002), landmark essays in Writing Program Administration (Ritter & Ianetta, 2019), faculty lives and gender roles (Enos & Borrowman, 2008), bullying in the WPA workplace (Elder & Davila, 2019), and case studies of independent writing programs (O'Neill, Crowe, & Burton, 2002; Everett & Hanganu-Bresch, 2017) – all of which are predicated on the North American general education model and the institution of Freshman Composition. This opportunity for rich scholarship on WPA is absent from the British higher education model that pervades Australasian universities.

Perhaps more than any other field, writing and literacy instruction holds at its core the powerful distinction that Shirley Rose and Irwin Weiser draw between "knowing that" and "knowing how," (2002), or the relationship between theoretical knowledge and practical application, as well as Eileen Maimon's concept of "home campus ethnographers" (2006), since much of this work involves reading people, situations, and institutional policies and responding accordingly. The dappled history of composition in the United States reveals familiar problems of resistance and disciplinary biases that seem to come naturally with the territory of writing and literacy instruction – particularly in ivy league or R1 universities where the legitimacy of such scholarship can be suspect (Rose & Weiser, 1999; Charlton, Charlton, Graban, Ryan, & Ferdinandt Stolley, 2011; Adler-Kassner, 2008) – but policies from national professional organizations and a wealth of such organizations devoted to writing and literacy offer at least some guidance and recourse. The

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Portland Resolution, for example, suggests that preparation for teaching writing and literacy should include knowledge of or experience with the following:

- teaching composition and rhetoric;
- theories of writing and learning;
- research methods, evaluation methods, and teaching methods;
- language and literacy development;
- various national guidelines and position statements;
- local and national developments in writing instruction;
- writing, publishing, and presenting at conferences.

However, there are no such resolutions in Australasia around writing and literacy instruction, and as Jeanne Gunner (1997, p. 23) argues, "local conditions so deeply affect the position's definition, problems, and possibilities that it can seem almost self-defeating to try to arrive at consensus on what we see as the essential professional elements." This is particularly true in a higher education culture without a general education curriculum or required writing requirement, yet there are commonalities across both Australasian and American approaches:

- colleges or universities where writing instruction is viewed as a "content-free zone" (Beason, 2000);
- academic departments where the scholarship of literacy work is either dismissed or undervalued (Latta, 2004);
- colleges or universities with limited writing/literacy instruction (McClure, 2008);
- contexts where literacy staff are bullied, exploited, or harassed (Elder & Davila, 2019).

Realizing the need to formalise writing and literacy as a discipline in Australasia, Kate Chanock, Claire Woods, Jan Skillen, Jenn Webb, Anne Surma, Rosemary Clerehan, Keith Comer, Gail Pittaway, and other scholars have advocated for three decades on the importance of writing and rhetoric to the culture of Australasian higher education. Yet the pendulum of university priorities and policies swings back and forth every few years with national mandates and new directions for the sector: curriculum reform, the move from three-year to four-year undergraduate degrees, and, most recently, an unprecedented emphasis on interdisciplinarity. But to some extent, the more things change, the more they remain the same. Universities still chase rankings and prestige while relying heavily on international fee income and aiming for increased diversity among their domestic student cohorts. And with an ever-increasing focus on globalization and sustainability, discussions around writing as a meaning-making practice and a way of being in the world have never been more timely.

Responding to this impetus, in late 2016, Karen Orr Vered (Flinders University), in consultation with colleagues Rowena Harper (University of South Australia) and Susan Thomas (University of Sydney), brought together a group of scholars from across Australia and New Zealand to share their individual and institutional perspectives on the directions that student literacy development in Australasia might take next and to describe what the horizon looks like from different positions within universities across Australia and New Zealand. From the Margins to the Centre: The Future of University Literacy Support and Writing across the Curriculum was a one-day symposium hosted by Flinders University to showcase and interrogate a variety of boundary-crossing, collaborative, whole-of-institution approaches to student literacy development, and the policies behind them. The forum was meant to be a catalytic event and presenters were encouraged to be provocative. The eight plenary/featured speakers represented a wide array of personnel responsible for student literacy learning: discipline-based instructors, learning developers, librarians, and a writing centre

director. Each speaker presented a whole-of-institution approach that their university has taken and discussed its benefits, insufficiencies, and potential.[1]

One can almost hear the North American readership asking, "What's the big deal?" But for Australasia, this gathering was quite unusual. From the Margins to the Centre provided an opportunity to speak across the boundaries that usually segregate us into our disciplines, professions, structural silos, and administrative allegiances and, in doing so, brought the discussion of literacy from the margins to the centre of our shared responsibility for student development. What may also be surprising to the North American reader is that Australia and New Zealand have neither a strong liberal arts educational tradition nor general education requirements. There is no history of Freshman Composition or institution-wide approaches to writing in the disciplines. Writing Centres in the rhetorical tradition are the exception and first-year writing requirements for degree credit are relatively recent additions to degree structures (where they exist at all).

Underpinning "national regulatory and quality assurance arrangements" for higher education Australia-wide is the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) (2nd ed., 2013). Describing distinctive features of each degree type (i.e. Bachelor, Masters, Doctoral), the AQF specifies communication skills as a required outcome for all tertiary programs, both as a generic learning outcome and a specified skill. For a Bachelor degree, the AQF states that graduates will have

> well-developed cognitive, technical and communication skills to select and apply methods and technologies to: analyse and evaluate information to complete a range of activities; analyse, generate and transmit solutions to unpredictable and sometimes complex problems; transmit knowledge, skills and ideas to others. (2013, p. 13)

In New Zealand, the Tertiary Education Committee (TEC), which outlines government priorities for tertiary education, includes literacy as one of its six key priorities in its 2014–2019 strategy (New Zealand TEC, 2019). As well as specifying literacy as a key priority, literacy and communication skills are included in other priorities as transferable skills required for future success in the workplace. Within the Māori Tertiary Education Framework (also developed by TEC), literacy learning is also highlighted within the specific bi-lingual context of Aotearoa New Zealand (Ministry of Education New Zealand, 2003).

In parallel with these broader strategic directions – or perhaps as a consequence of these directives – Australian and New Zealand universities commonly include the ability to write and/or communicate effectively in their enumeration of graduate qualities or graduate attributes – the characteristics that graduates will possess upon completion of their degree.

Despite these assurances, graduates' written skills often do not meet employer expectations (Graduate Careers Australia, 2015), even though they remain top among the qualities that employers seek in new recruits. The disjuncture this represents becomes more concerning as higher education in Australasia expands and diversifies under a policy of "widening participation" which seeks to have 40% of all Australians 25–34 years old holding Bachelor degrees by 2025, combined with a stated goal for 20% of the undergraduate cohort in 2020 to come from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Gale & Parker, 2013; see also in this issue). In New Zealand, while TEC has not specified the proportion of the population to attain tertiary qualifications, the Framework for Youth and Transitions specifies that by 2017, 85% of all 18-year-olds will achieve NCEA Level 2, including the literacy and numeracy requirements for university entrance (New Zealand TEC, 2016, p. 6). The higher education expansion agenda in both countries requires that equity principles be enacted to support all students to achieve the required outcomes and equip graduates to progress in their careers. In New Zealand, Māori and Pasifika learners are of particular concern, given a

history of poor transition to and retention in higher education. The critical challenge for universities is to meet the increased and diverse student demand for literacy support and development with limited resources and student services that are stretched to their limits. In this context, as Susan Thomas points out in her contribution to this collection, shifting university cultures around writing so that writing instruction is understood as a fundamental and global good, will require institutional change. While specific cohorts do have particular needs (e.g. dyslexia is the most commonly recognised disability among Flinders University students; Indigenous support units recognise the diverse needs and cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) students, such as Flinders University's Office of Indigenous Strategy and Engagement and University of Adelaide's Wirltu Yarlu; Māori students require a learning context that is sensitive to kaupapa Māori in New Zealand), widening participation signals an opportunity to establish more broad-based, university-wide measures to ensure that every student gains capacity and ability in critical reading and written expression so that literacy remains a mark of "higher" education.

The symposium was convened to share perspectives on these challenges and learn what was being done in different institutional contexts. The symposium was advertised through circulation to a variety of organizations: directly to the three South Australian universities (University of Adelaide, Flinders University, University of South Australia) and through the speakers' networks to contacts across Australia and New Zealand; Higher Education Research & Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA); Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA); Cooperative Action by Victorian Academic Libraries (CAVAL); International Education Association of Australia (IEAA); ISANA: International Education Association; Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP); Australian Literacy Educators' Association (ALEA); Association for Academic Language and Learning (AALL); and, Australian Association for the Teaching of English (AATE).

More than seventy participants (mostly observers) attended, representing twenty Australian universities, two New Zealand universities, the vocational education sector, higher education partnering organizations, secondary schools, and the South Australian Department for Education and Child Development. This was an outstanding achievement, given the relative invisibility of writing instruction in Australasian higher education. Following from the high level of participation and ongoing interest, three presenters – Lisa Emerson, Steve Johnson, and Susan Thomas – joined with Vered in proposing this special issue. We requested papers from the presenters and delegates and circulated a wider call for papers through the organizations that had promoted the symposium and a few others, including WPA-L, W-Center, HASS Futures, and our personal collegial networks.

The call for papers sought contributions from a range of perspectives and methodological approaches (e.g. research-based, theoretical, historically-informed, empirical, conceptual, comparative) addressing student development of literacy, communication, and writing across several themes and their intersections, including whole-of-institution, program, and curriculum approaches, including student support.

While not all symposium speakers were able to contribute papers for publication,[2] the papers comprising this special issue respond to the catalytic impetus of the symposium and present a selection of practices from across Australia and New Zealand. Each article provides a case study to explore how a theoretical or pedagogical approach has been implemented in the Australasian context. Examining the discourses that have informed policy and practice in Australia since the 1970s, Alisa Percy describes the "seduction and frustration of the 'margins to the centre' narrative" as a personal reflection, a professional narrative, and a political battleground on which Academic Language and Learning (ALL) educators continue to fight against the myth of language transience. Rather than literacy educators mapping a linear pathway from the margins to the centre, Percy suggests that ALL staff occupy a "multi-dimensional space in the academy." Percy's article provides

an important historico-political view of how language and literacy development has been approached in Australia and will be of particular interest to readers unfamiliar with the Australian higher education scene.

Andrew Johnson picks up two strands of the margin or centre question – whether credit-bearing writing subjects are at the centre of curricula and whether the instructors who staff these courses are professionally marginalised – and puts these issues to the side to explore how writing about writing and threshold concepts might be useful to the initial development of credit-bearing writing subjects in Australia. He outlines the design and delivery of a credit-bearing, first-year academic writing subject (the closest equivalent to Freshman Composition) and the challenges associated with tackling the "content problem" in generic writing courses.

Writing from Aotearoa New Zealand, a postcolonial and multicultural society that values Indigenous knowledge and perspectives, Hannah Gerrard's discussion of a first-year writing course focalised through the Bachelor of Arts core theme of "citizenship" at one level engages the "content problem." Questions of citizenship are not easily divorced from nationhood and national interest. So, questions of public education's duty to nation and citizen and the political status of higher education are brought to the fore in Gerrard's discussion while maintaining a focus on Māori worldview, language, and experience. Importantly, Gerrard draws our attention to the productivity that can arise from tensions inherent in "shifting frames and hierarchies of belonging" for student writers and their instructors as they develop identity, voice, and agency through this pedagogical framework and on "contested ground."

More than one quarter of Australian university students are international (Universities Australia, 2019) and writing for publication in English presents a unique challenge for many students and their research supervisors. This is exacerbated by the lack of coursework in Australian doctoral programs and the opportunities such peer cohorts offer for co-authorship, group work, and other social immersion experiences that assist in language acquisition more organically. Thi Van Yen Hoang and Lai Ping Florence Ma present findings from a small qualitative study of experiences among seven Vietnamese doctoral students from social sciences and science disciplines in Australia, offering detailed accounts of each student's experiences with the scholarly publishing process. Their findings reveal how existing difficulties of EAL students transitioning from L1 to L2 discourses can be compounded by the prejudices of journal "gatekeepers" and/or unequal power relationships between supervisors and students.

Sandra Egege and Karen Orr Vered make a compelling case for critical thinking, in particular critical reading and shared inquiry, in transforming the way students think about writing and literacy. Drawing from student writing samples in a media writing class at Flinders University, they offer data that suggest a connection between shared inquiry and improved writing abilities. Drawing on Alice Horning's pioneering work in critical reading, they contend that beyond just "doing the reading," shared inquiry instils in students a sense of making meaning through the reading – a distinct rhetorical act.

Susan Thomas's article rounds out the issue with a reflective account of the challenging process of instigating and sustaining institutional culture change. She explains how and why reforming Australian writing instruction from the centre with a Writing Centre-based writing across the curriculum (WAC) program is well suited to the Australian higher education context.

Across all of the articles in this issue, readers will notice the explicit attention to policy at both the national and institutional levels and the need to establish writing as a practice or discipline, rather than a product. As Alisa Percy observes, the arguments advanced across these essays are not novel,

even in Australasia. But given the limited progress in the last 30 years, such arguments are worth repeating.

Nevertheless, this collection provides a moment of optimism. In 2009, Emerson and Clerehan (p. 173-174), writing about literacy and writing instruction in higher education in Australasia, made the following comment:

> The challenge for us in both countries [Australia and New Zealand] is how to develop sufficient political momentum and influence for more broadly based and wider reaching research-based writing/literacy programs to be effectively developed. The game is still up for grabs.

Ten years later, the challenge of developing political momentum and influence remains, and the game is still "up for grabs" (a common expression in Australia/New Zealand). But what the symposium and this collection show is that progress is being made in the development of institutional-level writing/literacy programs in higher education in Australia and New Zealand. Yes, progress may be slow, but literacy/writing scholars in our countries are not just engaging with the conversation but beginning to take the lead.

Notes

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[2] We note, in particular, Steve Johnson's withdrawal from the editorial team, due to illness, and thank him for his contribution to the initial planning and review processes for this issue.

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