A Case Study of Research-based Collaboration around Writing in Social Work

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Abstract: This article discusses an ongoing research-based collaboration between an academic literacies researcher and a lecturer in the field of Social Work aimed at exploring the nature of everyday writing in social work. The paper outlines the key principles of the methodology adopted—a text-oriented ethnography—and discusses the extent to which this methodology is facilitating a collaborative partnership towards meeting three interrelated goals: the empirical goal of building rich descriptions of writing in everyday social work practice; the ideological-epistemological goal of challenging a deficit discourse on writing (and writers); and the interventionist goal of working with institutions to harness writing in productive ways to learning and professional practice. Central to this methodological approach is an attempt to build a three-way conversation between the fields of 'new' literacy studies, in particular academic literacies; the discipline of social work education; and social work agencies/practitioners. We outline the methodology and foreground some key congruencies across these fields which are helping to facilitate successful collaboration.[1]

For the past two years we have been working together on a research project exploring the writing that social workers do routinely as part of their everyday work, and bringing such understandings to debates about which kinds of writing might be most usefully embedded in the social work curriculum in higher education. Our research starts from the position that writing is viewed as a problematic area in social work education and practice, by both social work educators and practitioners albeit for different reasons[2] and a key goal of our research is to articulate the nature of this 'problem'.

We identify ourselves as working from what can be broadly characterised as two distinct fields—Theresa as an academic literacy researcher (Lillis, 2001, Lillis and Scott, 2007) and Lucy as a lecturer-researcher in Social Work (Rai 2004, 2006). At the same time, we have been seeking to collaborate with workers in a third field, that of social work practice (social workers, managers and agencies) as we see such collaborations as central to building shared (and useful) understandings about writing in social work. Our collaboration involves starting from a research-based interest in writing outside of the academic institution, which we see as leading to curriculum intervention, rather than starting from a specific curriculum-based intervention initiative, as is common in much Content and Language Integration (ICL) work and in many of the papers in this volume.

There are three main goals in our research project:

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- an empirical goal of offering rich descriptions of writing in everyday, routine, social work practice
- an epistemological-ideological goal of getting language and literacy on institutional agendas in ways which challenge transparency or deficit discourses ("social workers can't write", "social work students can't write")
- an interventionist goal to work with academic and professional institutions to develop writing in both education and practice in ways which take account of the everyday writing demands, practices and interests of social workers.

The aim of this paper is to give an overview of the theoretical and methodological principles underpinning our 'text-oriented ethnographic' approach (Lillis, 2008) including the specific way in which this approach engages with work in the tradition of ICL to summarise the extent to which this approach is enabling us to meet our three goals, outlined above. In order to do this the paper is made up of two types of contributions: the first is a conventional academic account and discussion of the research project in relation to the goals of this paper; the second are reflective comments about the key challenges we face in building and sustaining successful collaboration. In these comments we signal some of the challenges we face and point to some congruencies in discourses and values between the fields which we consider are enhancing our collaboration. We are using *field* here after Bourdieu (1991) to signal historically situated and structured knowledge making practices each of which have their own discourses, understandings and conventions and which can present challenges when participants from these fields seek to collaborate.

The Research Project: Context, Questions and Intervention

In order to illustrate our methodology, we refer throughout to one of our ongoing research projects[3]. A summary of the research project, research questions and context is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Overview of the Research Project

	Collaborative Research Project: Social Work Writing in Children's Services
Research Methodology	Text-oriented ethnography
Intervention Orientation	Oriented to the HEI in first instance: What kind of writing might most usefully be taught/practised as part of the curriculum? Drawing on the research findings, what kinds of writing pedagogy might be most relevant/meaningful?
Overarching Empirical Research Question	**What everyday writing do social workers do**?
Initial Research Focus as Defined by the Lead Researchers	A higher education institution (HEI) is concerned to explore the relevance and effectiveness of teaching and assessing writing on a qualifying social work degree course to writing in social work practice.
Co-Researchers/Research Participants	Five social workers from 5 different agencies as co-researchers, with Lucy and Theresa as lead researchers

Reflection 1: Building and Sustaining Collaboration

Collaborating on the design and implementation of this project has been relatively straightforward in that we share an interest in the importance of writing and in exploring what kind of writing is being carried out in the contexts of social work curriculum and practice. We also share an interest in action-oriented research - research which will lead to action either directly - by leading to a specific intervention - or indirectly by feeding into debates and discussion around curriculum and pedagogy. At the same time, we have a strong sense of our separate knowledge strengths—Theresa in language and literacy—and Lucy in social work education and pedagogy, and her specific interests in issues around access and writing. It has therefore been relatively easy to allot tasks according to our strengths - for example, Lucy negotiating with social work agencies and in discussion with prospective participants, and Theresa planning the literacy research tools for discussion with the social workers.

Where we differ sometimes is the extent to which we consider we should be directive about language and writing: Theresa tends to want to make texts and language an explicit focus of much discussion with social workers so as to draw discussions towards language; Lucy tends to want to facilitate discussion about participants' individual perceptions and experiences of institutional practices. These differences reflect our different fields and therefore areas we constantly negotiate. Our starting position however is that each position is valid and we need to ensure space for both approaches.

Developing a Text Oriented Ethnography: Methodology, Epistemology and 'ICL'

The Question of Language

The overarching methodology we are using is a 'text-oriented ethnography' (see Lillis, 2008), a key epistemological principle of which is the fundamentally contextual nature of all language, including writing. This epistemological position on the relationship between language and context means that at the heart of our approach is an understanding that 'content' and 'language' cannot be separated. Whilst apparently obvious, we think this is an important point to make within the context of 'ICL' discussions. First of all, the very label ICL signals the possibility of content being separated from language in a fundamental way. Yet as much work in related areas of study indicates—academic literacies (e.g. Lillis and Scott, 2007; Thesen and van Pletzen, 2006), sociology of knowledge (e.g. Latour and Woolgar, 1986), Writing Across the Curriculum (e.g. Russell, 1997), and illustrated in many of the papers in this special issue—language is not a transparent conduit of disciplinary knowledge, but rather constitutive of knowledge and specific knowledge making practices.

Secondly, and relatedly, much of the work in European based ICL is premised upon the notion of the 'language' in 'ICL' being a 'second', 'foreign' or 'additional' language (see for example European Commission – Content and Language Integrated Learning). ICL here is construed as a device for promoting 'foreign' (second, additional) language learning. However there are several nested (if unstated) and problematic assumptions in such a framing of 'language' here:

a. that the linguistic repertoire of students and teachers easily maps against these definitions (whereas many students across Europe and the world rather move through a range of repertoires which the word 'languaging', rather than 'language', usefully indexes (for languaging in higher education, see Turner, 2011, Chapter 3)
b. that the principal language dimension or 'problem' of concern to educators is one of individual competence in specific languages, rather than, a more complex cluster of intersecting 'language' resources and practices which include discourses, genres and associated issues of identity,

access and power, as well as more traditionally demarcated 'languages' (such as English, Xhosa, Spanish etc.)

c. that the principal goal of 'ICL' initiatives is normative, that is as facilitating access to dominant genres and practices, rather than opening up debates about users having opportunities to question dominant practices and being involved in shaping semiotic resources to be used

In our research project, our position with regard to the 'language' in 'ICL' is to work with a cluster of dimensions in mind: discourses, genres and associated issues of identity, access and power, as well as more traditionally demarcated 'languages', and to employ a notion of literacies as multiple, situated, and contested. Exactly which dimensions will be significant at any one moment in time is an empirical question - one to be asked and explored with participants (through some of the tools listed in Table 2 below) rather than assumed.

With specific regard to 'literacy' in the context of ICL debates, we work with what has come to be known as an 'academic literacies' approach, which strongly connects with work by Jacobs (2005, 2007) who foregrounds the embedded nature of language and literacy and Paxton's emphasis on the situated and contested nature of language, literacy and the curriculum (Paxton, 2011). This approach seeks to ask apparently naïve questions about literacy practices rather than taking them as given, key examples of which are as follows:

> what is the nature of 'academic' writing in different sites and contexts?; what does it mean to participants to 'do' academic writing?; how are identity and identification bound up with rhetorical and communicative practices in the academy?; to what extent and in which specific ways do prevailing conventions and practices enable and constrain meaning making?; what opportunities exist for drawing a range of theoretical and semiotic resources into academic meaning making? (Lillis and Scott, 2007, p. 5)

We are interested in asking these questions in relation to writing in the academy and the workplace and in exploring connections between the two. We return to the importance of this 'naive questioning' about language and literacy for our collaborative endeavour in Reflection 2 below.

Developing a Text-oriented Ethnography

In order to explore the nature of routine writing in social work, and in tune with our approach to ethnography as epistemology outlined above, we have adopted a text-oriented ethnographic approach which involves the collection and analysis of a range of ethnographic and text-based data to explore the production of texts in their contexts. The three key methodological principles we have sought to follow are listed in Table 2, and alongside these a brief description of the data that we have collected.

Table 2: Attempts to Put into Practice the Three Key Methodological Principles

Key Methodological Principles	**Putting the Principles into Action**
Sustained engagement with writers and the sites of production	Involving 5 social workers as co-researchers who collected data about their own practices and met with researchers over a period of 18 months

Collection and analysis of multiple data sources in order to build rich understandings of what is involved and what is at stake (for whom).	• 20 days of diaries kept by co-researchers recording the range, type and amount of writing carried out in their daily working lives; • approximately 200 anonymised texts produced in practice; • 4 group discussions involving researchers and co-researchers conducted using telephone conferencing (transcribed) during the period of journal and text collection; • individual interviews with the co-researchers about their writing practices and experiences; • 3 day face to face workshops; • teaching and assessment materials from The Open University BA Social Work
Valuing and engaging with emic and etic approaches and discourses	Co-researchers contribute their understandings and discourses through interviews/discussions/workshops

Reflection 2: Moving Between Emic and Etic Positioning in Making Language Visible

Adopting a critical stance towards language and literacy is more familiar at this stage to Theresa than to Lucy and in this collaboration it was particularly important for Theresa to provide a kind of constant naïve questioning about language and its uses. For example, if a particular type of social work text is mentioned, Theresa will always ask for details about this 'text'—what it is, its textual features, how it is used, when and by whom. In this way she consciously works at being an 'outsider' to social work practices aiming to 'make strange' (see Agar, 1996) the language and literacy practices with which social workers are so familiar that such practices can remain invisible. At the same time, the attention to the context in which language and literacy takes place that ethnography advocates is fundamental in social work education theory and practice and 'case study' is a familiar work tool. Thus the overarching approach of seeking to understand people and language in context is familiar to us all at some level and one with which all collaborators feel comfortable.

We also think that the productive tension between emic and etic emphasised in ethnographic approaches (see Lillis, 2008) usefully maps on to what we see as a constant interplay between our insider/outsider positions (Jacobs, 2007) with regard to social work education and practice and language/literacy. Whilst—as illustrated with regard to language discussion above—there are moments where one of us is the 'insider' to a field (e.g. Lucy in social work) and the other an outsider to that field (e.g. Theresa), we think this can more accurately be described as moments of insider/outsiderness which shift, not least, as we grow in understandings about the fields of knowledge with which we are engaging.

Meeting our Goals?

In this section, we consider the extent to which our methodology is helping us to meet our three key research goals and in each case offer reflections on the ways in which it is facilitating our collaborative work.

Goal 1: Empirical Goal of Building Rich Descriptions of Writing in Everyday Social Work Practice

A key goal is to build rich descriptions of the kinds of writing that social workers do and their perspectives on such writing. A summary of the data collected in the project is provided in Table 2. Our focus in this paper is on the collaborative process, rather than a discussion of the findings from the project, but the following illustrates in broad terms the success of the methodology in building rich descriptions of writing in social work practice. The methodology is enabling us to document:

- the kinds of writing being carried out in everyday social work
- the ways in which what counts as writing in social work is mediated by a whole range of tools notably IT systems
- the extent to which everyday social work writing maps on to the writing demands and practices of HEI courses
- participants' perspectives on their writing—both their everyday social work writing and, for those workers who have recently qualified as social workers on an HEI course, their perspectives on the relationship between everyday writing and writing on social work courses
- the significance and meaning attached to 'professional' voice and authority
- participants and agencies' perspectives on where the teaching and learning of specific kinds of social work writing should happen

Reflection 3 Involving Professional Social Workers in Collaborative Research about Writing

A key aim was to extend our collaborative approach to the participants but we were unsure about how successful we would be. What we found was that the social workers—even though they were involved in the research in addition to busy working lives—appreciated the opportunity for discussing and commenting on their writing, both individually with Theresa or Lucy, and in the group. For example, one social worker employed in a youth justice team brought to the group a court report in which he was required to provide a professional view on the sentencing of a young person. (He had also listed this report in his diary where he had also detailed who was involved in creating the text, how it was written and stored and the timescales involved). He discussed the process and issues involved in creating this particular text during one of our weekly group meetings (audio recorded) which generated discussion around specific aspects of texts and issues of representation: a key point of discussion was the use of reported speech in reports and the extent to which these had to be transformed according to specific views about 'appropriateness'. In the specific text discussed, the worker had been advised that he could not include 'swearing' used by a participant, even though the worker felt that the exclusion of such language had the effect of diminishing the aggression shown by the service user.

We think this brief overview of this particular text and discussion illustrates the following: that the involvement of workers in documenting and commenting on their own practices is a key way of generating rich data, that is data which a researcher alone would not be able to generate, including the values and practices surrounding the textual practices of the specific research contexts; that this approach helps make visible 'language' and 'literacy' in ways which are often kept under the radar, keying all collaborators into the significance of language, and the way specific uses are bound up with affective dimensions and issues of regulation and power. In this specific instance, much discussion ensued about who could regulate wordings and the consequences of such regulation. We felt therefore that the methodology was opening up opportunities for discussions about writing and language in ways that were not often available or possible, but which were highly significant.

Goal 2: Ideological-Epistemological Goal of Challenging a Deficit Discourse on Writing (and Writers)

In the context of the three fields discussed in this paper, this goal can most strongly be located within 'academic literacies', where a basic position is to challenge deficit or 'autonomous' approaches to language and literacy (Street, 1984; Lea and Street, 1998; Thesen and van Pletzen, 2006; Lillis and Scott, 2007). What academic literacies brings to our collaborative work about writing in social work is this ideological position on literacy which informs the kind of methodology adopted (discussed above) and offers a strong critique of discussions of language and literacy which work with common-sense notions- such as 'good' and 'bad' writing or that writing is about simply recording information (a transparency model of language). Autonomous and deficit accounts of writing and literacy are pervasive in social work contexts of education and practice - as in all public domains - with the 'problem' of writing often being construed as an individual deficit and in terms of widely used, but not necessarily meaningful, categories such as – spelling, grammar, style, clarity.

Reflection 4: Context and reflexivity as key congruencies between fields

In preparing for our initial meeting, we were unsure whether the social workers would accept our framework for thinking about writing and had anticipated having to spend considerable amounts of time negotiating our understanding of language and literacy as fundamentally social practices, involving aspects of discourse, identity and power. We therefore tentatively introduced the framework of literacies to participating social workers in our first day meeting and were rather taken aback by the enthusiasm with which they responded; our introduction immediately prompted discussion and stories. Some brief examples -'I wonder how writing in youth offending differs from writing in children's services'; 'There's a lot of academic writing in some of our writing, and not in others'; 'I'd like to see more reflective comments in court reports'; 'There's not enough time for writing'; 'I'm often not happy with the quality of my writing'; 'There's no preparation for recording'; 'There's little space to discuss risks'. Opening up a discussion about what it means to do writing in social work seemed to provide a space for talking about writing which the social workers seemed to value. What we have both come to understand through our collaboration is that whilst autonomous and deficit accounts of writing and literacy are pervasive in talk about writing in social work contexts, the valuing of context and reflexivity in social work domains means that there is an openness to reflecting on language and its consequences for users.

These congruencies around the importance of context and reflexivity between the fields—(between social work as an academic field and as practice and the ethnographic approach underpinning much thinking in academic literacies) are not only enabling a positive collaboration but are in fact helping to challenge the 'common sense' reliance on a deficit approach to writing.

Goal 3: Interventionist Goal of Working with Institutions to Harness Writing in Productive Ways to Learning and Professional Practice

This third goal of intervention is central to our research. As indicated in Table 1, the immediate intervention 'orientation' in this project is towards the higher education institution: that is to draw on research findings to feed into interventions in the curriculum. However, collaborating social workers are feeding back findings directly to their agencies, encouraging debate about writing within their institutions. Agencies are keen to receive reports from the project and to involve us in workshops about writing.

Reflection 5: Front and Back Stage Interventionist Collaboration

In terms of our collaboration towards intervention, we have come to see the need for strategic flexibility with regard to our visibility. With regard to intervention in the social work curriculum, Lucy, is very much 'front stage', whereas Theresa is back stage. Lucy, as a senior academic in the social work department, can draw on her disciplinary expertise, position and status to lead initiatives on language and writing from a central, rather than a marginal position that so many 'language' specialists/academic developers find themselves in. We see Theresa's role here as one of support 'from the wings' as it were: working with Lucy on the research projects and findings which Lucy can draw on in workshops with colleagues.

In contrast, with regard to intervention with the agencies—in this case with/via the social worker collaborators—strategically it makes sense for us to be equally visible and centrally involved, taking up the positions we are offered by the agencies, that is, both as 'experts' in the field of writing in social work.

Conclusion

Writing in social work is a high stakes activity for all involved: most obviously, written texts play a central role in highly consequential decisions about actions and services for people and are used to evaluate a social worker's competence. Learning how to write as a social worker, as part of academic and work-based activity is a complex, yet often invisible aspect both of the academic curriculum and professional/work development. Our contribution to debates about where and how writing should be taught in the HEI curriculum perhaps has an unusual starting point and perspective: a collaborative research project focusing on everyday social work writing. However, we think that reaching some understanding of the nature of 'everyday' social work writing is essential to HEI providers of social work courses, particularly those which are actively seeking to embed meaningful writing practices within the academic curriculum space. It is also of importance to social work agencies and professional institutions seeking to develop social workers' practice.

In terms of the methodology discussed here, we have found that a text-oriented ethnographic approach is generating rich data as well as nurturing a strong collaboration between, in the first instance, an 'academic literacies' specialist and a social worker lecturer, and secondly, collaborating social workers and their agencies. This three-way collaboration is in part made possible by two key congruencies between the fields: these are the valuing of context as fundamental to exploring and understanding human behaviour and interaction; and the practice of reflexivity. We are seeking to draw on the productive tension between insider/outsider - emic/etic knowledge and understandings drawn from the three fields of knowledge. In general terms, we see our approach as reflecting a long tradition in contextualised language research:

> The proper role of the scientist, and the goal of his and her efforts, should not be 'extractive' but meditative. It should be to help communities be ethnographers of their own situation. (Hymes, 1996, p. 60, first published 1973)

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Notes

[1] We would like to thank the participating social workers and their agencies for the considerable time, energy and commitment they have devoted to this research project.

[2] See Pare (2000) and Rai (2004, 2006) for overviews of key issues around writing in social work.

[3] We are currently involved in two research based collaborative projects. The first focuses on social work writing in Children's Services, illustrated briefly in this paper; the second focuses on writing in Adult Services.

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