Writing Instruction in Australia

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"Writing Instruction" in Australia usually means one of two things: creative writing or TESOL, both having rich histories and traditions and usually offered as graduate courses in departments of Education or Linguistics. Academic writing, however, with few exceptions, is an all-but-invisible practice in undergraduate education. It draws attention only when it falls short, at which point the response is to fix what's wrong at the surface level rather than consider the broader needs of student writers. For this reason, Australia's version of compositionists, academic language and literacy (ALL) experts, are usually located in learning and language centers, regarded as (re) mediators for academic casualties (Percy). From an institutional standpoint, theirs is a deficit discourse, a "study skills" approach, divorced from disciplinary contexts and focused on redeeming or rehabilitating "weak" students (McKenna). And while progressive scholars have launched remarkable initiatives over the past thirty years, advocating for more embedded approaches (Chanock; Clanchy; Percy 2011; Skillen et al.), including Writing Across the Curriculum/WAC (Petelin) and writing centers (Emerson; Thomas), these are usually short-lived, overcome by the prevailing deficit remediation model.

Since the 1970s, there have been strong arguments for moving academic writing into the mainstream of Australian higher education. John Clanchy, Kate Chanock and Valerie Burley, Claire Woods and Paul Skrebels, Anne Surma, Carolyn Webb, Roslyn Petelin, Jan Skillen, Lisa Emerson and Rosemary Clerehan, Alisa Percy, and others have advocated for embedded approaches to writing instruction in Australian universities, which American compositionists would recognize as a WAC approach. But Australian universities have neither a strong liberal arts education tradition nor a general education requirement. There is no history of first year writing nor institution-wide approaches to writing in/across the disciplines, despite brilliant, if short-lived, initiatives at various institutions. Writing centers are the exception rather than the rule, and accredited writing courses are relatively recent elective additions to degree structures (where they exist at all). The Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) underpins "national regulatory and quality assurance arrangements" for higher education Australia-wide. Describing distinctive features of each degree type (i.e., bachelor's, master's, doctoral), the AQF specifies communication proficiency as a required outcome for all tertiary programs, both as a generic learning outcome and a specified skill. For a bachelor's degree, the AQF states that graduates will have:

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

In keeping with these broader strategic directions – or possibly as a consequence of them – Australian universities commonly include the ability to write and/or communicate effectively in their list of desired graduate attributes. However, there is usually no corresponding writing/communication instruction to support this outcome, and despite employers' general satisfaction with new graduates' performance, graduates' written skills usually do not meet employer expectations (Graduate Careers Australia).

This disjuncture becomes even more concerning as Australian higher education expands and diversifies under a policy of "widening participation," which seeks to have 40% of all Australians 25–34 years old holding achelor's degrees by 2025, combined with a stated goal for 20% of the undergraduate cohort in 2020 to come from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Gale and Parker). The higher education expansion agenda requires equity principles to support all students to achieve the required outcomes and equip graduates to progress in their careers; however, the development of corresponding writing programs to support such students has not kept pace with policy, leaving universities unable to meet increasing student demand for writing instruction. And despite being attracted to Australian universities by sophisticated marketing campaigns, culturally and linguistically diverse students often face a reality far different from the anticipated experience (Tian). With few exceptions, they are expected to assimilate on their own and take language acquisition classes at their own expense if their writing needs exceed the scope of short programs offered through learning centers or libraries. But with learning and language centers stretched to their limits in response to the latest "literacy crisis" (*The Australian*), which exposes contract cheating as a last resort for struggling international students, the time has come to acknowledge the limitations of deficit remediation approaches to writing instruction.

However, rearticulating writing instruction as a social act—a fundamental and global good for *all* students—will require a major paradigm shift. The challenge for Australian educators will be developing sufficient political momentum and influence for embedded, research-based writing programs to be effectively and consistently developed across the country. The history of American professional organizations for writing program administrators serves as a useful precedent for how collective activism can shift discourses around academic writing from remediation to integration. But before progress can

be made, Australian WPAs must consider the history of Australian higher education and the political and social forces that have shaped it, not least the concepts of "path dependency," (Davis), a seeming inertia to maintain the British educational system's status quo, and "cultural cringe" (Phillips), which is often interpreted as a blatant Australian refusal to admit inferiority of any kind, including the need for writing instruction.

As former Vice Chancellor of the University of Melbourne Glyn Davis explains, the tendency of Australian institutions to cling to the familiar can be attributed to the concept of "path dependency" that has seen Australian universities conform to a single model:

> We choose a path and thereafter it shapes our choices—the 'deep lane insists on the direction', as T.S. Eliot wrote in 'East Coker'. The further we go, the more we commit to this direction; the further behind fall the other choices, those paths not taken. Over time, this seems the only road possible. For universities in Australia, the path chosen early still guides our bearing. A distinctive Australian idea of a university, developed in colonial society, has influenced all universities created since 1850.

In early 2004, I would encounter path dependency firsthand when I was hired by the University of Sydney to design and implement a first year writing program in the English Department. Confronted with institutional challenges, pressures, and mindsets eerily reminiscent of those in nineteenth-century American universities, I had seemingly stepped back into Fred Newton Scott's milieu. And while my knowledge of Australian higher education was admittedly limited, my understanding of the history of writing instruction in the United States, particularly the seemingly universal struggle between tradition and progress, made me well-placed to recognize the conditions that would make a writing program all but impossible in an Australian Department of English. Despite American and Australian higher education histories sharing common milestones, their respective responses to the effects of post-WWII massification on university enrollments, namely their approaches to language and literacy education, have been starkly different. While composition courses came into their own in America following WWII, to cater to a rapidly diversifying student population, Australian universities made no such changes to their curriculum, despite also having a more diverse student population. While "path dependency" might be mostly to blame, one must not overlook "cultural cringe," which has become a familiar Australian catch-phrase after Melbourne schoolmaster A.A. Phillips coined the term in 1950. Rollo Hesketh writes:

The term has come to refer to Australians' inherent lack of faith in their own culture, often at the popular level. This is divorced from the originally intended meaning, which was explicitly linked to "high" culture. Phillips wished to create a national culture that conceded no inferiority to Britain, and indeed was unembarrassed to be Australian: "temper, democratic; bias, offensively Australian." (https://meanjin.com.au/essays/a-a-phillips-and-the-icultural-cringei-creating-an-iaustralian-traditioni/).

Phillips acknowledges Australia's tendency to compare itself with Britain, the United States, and Europe, partly due to its origins as a convict settlement. But the cringe is also understood as a stubborn refusal to admit inferiority to any other nation or culture. Therefore, in addition to path dependency, the resistance of Australian universities to implementing a general education requirement or embedding writing instruction in the mainstream curriculum may point to a deeper reluctance to admit any perceived shortcomings in Australian universities—or their students. While working to establish the writing program in the Department of English, I was frequently reminded, "this isn't America," and "we've survived just fine for 150 years without 'Freshman Comp.'"

The academic writing program at the University of Sydney had followed the typical path in an Australian university, having been rejected by the mainstream but finding traction as a program in a learning and teaching unit. However, unlike short-lived writing initiatives in other universities, the program became the Department of Writing Studies in 2017. The first of its kind in Australia, the Department houses a thriving writing program, writing minor, writing center, and de facto WAC program. In 2020, a major in Writing Studies was approved, along with a senior academic hire. But despite these successes, current restructure proposals in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences have called for the merging of small departments with larger ones, recommending the amalgamation of Writing Studies and English. So after twelve years of demonstrable success, first as an independent program and then as an independent department, this field of dreams (O'Neill et al.) seems destined to join other Australian writing initiatives in the ever-growing minefield of dreams (Everett and Hanganu-Bresch).

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