

What Makes Writing Academic: Rethinking Theory for Practice. Julia Molinari. Bloomsbury, 2022

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Book Review

Molinari, J. (2022). *What Makes Writing Academic: Rethinking Theory for Practice*. Bloomsbury.

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Introduction

What Makes Writing Academic: Rethinking Theory for Practice (Molinari, 2022) joins a long-standing debate about the genre of academic writing—and what it is that makes it academic. The book opens with a useful overview provided in the “Foreword” by Chrissie Boughey which introduces the key issues that will follow and sets the tone for the reader. The book itself explores the knowledge work that academic writing traditionally accomplishes whilst also exploring the liberatory potential of what academic writing could be. Molinari recognises that the development of a genre of academic writing involved the loss of the oral and visual from academic culture and hence problematizes the notion of access and widening access to higher education. If writing itself remains unchallenged and untransformed then access *de facto* means indoctrination into exclusionary, reified unchallengeable forms rather than making space for new people, new voices, and new ontologies via new forms. Her purpose in writing the book is, as Molinari says herself:

- (1) to provide students, teachers and supervisors with reasons (and a license) to re-imagine academic texts;

(2) to extend established academic writing scholarship by introducing critical realism as a conceptual framework for justifying plural, democratized, multimodal, diverse and inclusive forms of academic writing; and

(3) to develop a philosophy of change that lays a foundation for diversifying writing pedagogies.

(p.1)

In this way, she hopes to decolonise, democratize, and make socially just the university and its practices: to truly welcome diverse students and challenge the neoliberal orthodoxy that dominates our times.

The book is divided into five (large) chapters, opening with a “Letter to My Reader” and closing with a “Signing Off” and “Afterword”. We provide a brief chapter by chapter synopsis to give readers an idea of the arguments put forward, before addressing the strengths and limitations of the book in our review.

Chapter by Chapter Synopsis

Letter to My Reader

Molinari’s critical take on academic writing is reinforced by her “Letter to my Reader.” Here, she addresses the reader directly, acknowledging that a year of a pandemic, working from home, and teaching in loungewear or at the kitchen table may have impacted writing, and, yet and still: “this is a serious book, it is an academic book and what makes it academic is the knowledge it deals with, the references it draws on, the research that has gone into it and my identity, my right to be a writer who is present in her text” (p.1). And, in this very open and welcoming voice, Molinari draws on the history of academia, socio-semiotic research, integrational linguistics, and studies in multimodal and visual thinking, to argue that writings themselves be reconceptualised more broadly. That dialogues, chronicles, manifestos, blogs, and comics be recognised as multimodal academic artifacts able to harness a wide range of epistemic affordances.

Chapter 1: Troubling Academic Writing: Problems and Implications for Higher Education

The first chapter opens the book by outlining why academic writing is troublesome, drawing on English for Academic Purpose (EAP) instruction in the UK as well as the US tradition of rhetoric and composition. The main argument made is that, over time, academic writing has been reduced to a

series of transferable mechanical skills, making the teaching—and the learning—of academic writing problematic. Provided is a semi-fictionalized example of a student, Sam, who struggles to understand the meaning and purpose of academic writing, perceiving the academic essay as “a ‘certain kind of thing’ that can be transferred across contexts” (p. 20), the kind of place where impersonal claims are made rather than a method for representing and transforming knowledge. Acknowledging that there are different perceptions, by both students and academics, of what academic writing is and what it is for, either a skill or a social practice, together with a slipperiness of use of terms such as theory, praxis, practice and skills, might explain misunderstandings and confusion. Molinari outlines how each approach has its own challenges, if taught isolated from the other, but especially how a skills-based teaching approach is insufficient to determine what makes a text academic. Provided is another example, Lucia, who is removed from class and sent to language lessons that would remedy her lack of understanding and help her develop her writing skills. The chapter outlines the implications of such a reductive approach to academic writing in EAP: aesthetically, socio-culturally and ethically. Molinari closes the chapter arguing that when academic writing is reduced to a finite set of transient skills, it can be “replicated and reproduced, copied and sold, downloaded and programmed algorithmically” (p.43), which invites the use of ghostwriters and essay mills.

Chapter 2: How Did We Get here? A Selected History

This chapter is an extensive one, focusing on what counts as academic from historical and theoretical perspectives. Academic writing as a form is not autochthonous (springing from the earth itself) but ideologically constructed by human beings, simultaneously creating values and positions with respect to those values. Molinari argues that what counts as literacy goes hand in hand with the belief in the superior, rational, and positivist positions of Western academia. It is allied with the belief that such logical and linear thinking is a mark of the literate—and at the same time subliminally allocates the failings of societies with the least powerful members of that society, the excluded illiterate. Molinari uses past literature (and arguments) to understand the present, highlighting a misguided conflation of the alphabet with cognition.

The chapter includes a well-researched and extensive disposition on writing and what has constituted writing in all its various forms over time. Historically, writing has included more multimodal and visual forms, and Molinari indicates that there is no inevitability to what constitutes academic writing today. There is no essentialism, except perhaps the emergence of Cartesian dualism, that meant that writing ended up as a more reductive, alphabet-based system. Indeed, the

overarching case is made that much is lost on that particular journey: “Even if we grant that alphabetic writing is a representation of speech, it has become clear that it is inherently inadequate in this representation” (p.51). Further, Molinari problematizes the argument (from authors who discuss orality versus literacy) that writing makes us think in certain (superior) ways.

Moreover, academia (or universities) did not always require students to write; teaching and learning were informal arrangements, with students reading, rehearsing, and interpreting. Academic writing gained momentum much later, with the emergence of print and the societal transformation that gave rise to individualism and standardization projecting the university towards novelty, objectivity, and competition. In addition, academic knowledge in universities has not always taken the form of the essay but has included poetry, encyclopediae, commentaries, and biography. Indeed, the essay itself, as argued for by Montaigne (cited in Molinari, p. 61), was an attempt to reclaim expressive freedom in the written form. The quest for truth and objectivity led to formalizing the way methods were reported and caveats applied to arguments. It also prompted a steep increase in the setting of written assessments that rather than furthering inclusion in academic discussion and conversation led to exclusionary practices. The section on “Writing and Its Ideologies” (pp.67-72) further outlines the exclusionary nature of academic language and academic writing per se—internally within the university and externally with respect to the dominance of the West—leading to epistemic injustices, restricting which knowledge and whose knowledge is allowed to emerge.

Chapter 3: What Makes Writing Academic: Learning from Writings ‘in the Wild’

This chapter makes the case that what makes a text academic is more than its content, style and arguments by focusing on the writings that, as Molinari puts it, “roam naturally, ‘in the wild’”; those writings that are “more inclusive and diverse, less standardized and prescriptive, less wedded to the ideologies associated with alphabetic literacies and more open to diverse ways of communicating knowledge” (p.73).

The chapter opens with a reflection on “academicness” (pp. 74-79)—a complex interplay between author intent, reader perception and text meaning. However, these are not specific and ‘pin-downable’ textual features (as perhaps indicated by EAP practices). Here, Molinari cites “hoaxes” which are constituted in what might be termed academic language, however, with the hoax, the intent is to deceive and therefore it promulgates “nonsense”. Thus, while technically counting as academic, they do not *not* meet putative standards of academicness. Molinari refers instead to Socio-academic

Practices (SAPs) (pp.80-81) which include the epistemic virtues of a commitment to the truth (Connell, 2013 cited in Molinari, p.80), to academic integrity (Zgaga, 2009 cited in Molinari, p.80), to social justice (Case, 2013 and McArthur, 2020 cited in Molinari, p.80) and to innovation and research (Warnock, 1989 cited in Molinari, p.80): that is, a commitment to “excellence.”

Molinari moves on to argue there are many “wild texts,” including the epigrams of Wittgenstein, that display many of what she refers to as “the threshold concepts of academic writing” (p.83) that whilst they disrupt normal formal conventions, are still cited and impactful. Language is anything but precise and transparent, and thus,

the limits of language signal the possibility that human cognition might develop through a range of representations whereby (academic) reality is not dependent on being represented by a single mode, namely language. When argument is allowed to draw on the most fitting modes rather than the most conventional, the richness and fullness of SAPs are more likely to emerge. (pp.86-87)

Molinari concludes that chapter by arguing that what makes writing academic, namely its academicness, cannot be reduced to any particular feature, which is an opportunity rather than a problem. When read cumulatively, the many respected wild texts afford creative possibilities for re-thinking academicness. These possibilities include de-centring alphabetic language to embrace multimodality and dethroning English as the *lingua franca* of academia.

Chapter 4: Critical Realism: Re-claiming Theory for Practice

This chapter continues the discussion on what academic writing is in a culture that favors performativity over deep knowledge engagement and creativity. Molinari uses the philosophical and sociological theory of critical realism to further criticize the skills-practice dualism. Key to this is interaction rather than relativism: “It is this interaction that allows academicness to emerge” (p.101). It is here that Molinari reaches for “critical realism” which she argues: “allows us to anchor and reclaim academicness as a property that emerges from the critical, judicious and reflexive *interaction* between the writer’s agency (their subjectivity) and their textual environments, or structures, which are objectively real” (p.100). She ponders: “...how might the REAL, the ACTUAL and the EMPIRICAL map on to an understanding of what makes writing academic?” (p.104). Molinari reviews three scholars—Michael Bernard-Donals, Donald Judd and Deirdre Pratt—linking them to complexity theory, which creates the cracks that allow emergence. She concludes by arguing that it benefits us to think of academic writing as a complex open system where both change and novelty become the norm and not the exception “in the pursuit of epistemic justice.”

Chapter 5: Foundations for a Future Writing Pedagogy

In the final chapter, Molinari comes back to her own EAP teaching practice—and that of her colleagues—arguing that what makes academic writing problematic is (not perhaps the students but) the way that writing itself is taught and its performative, logical, linear, objective and rule-bound *status quo*. She posits that those that challenge this should not be silenced, mocked or censored. Rather than being handmaidens to the disciplines, writing scholars should embrace a wide range of pedagogies and assessments, include more than alphabet-based language, and transcend deficit models of writing practices: “Tinkering around the edges won’t make this happen: radical, systemic and macro-structural transformation is needed if higher education writing practices are to be socially just, educationally transformative and epistemically complete” (p.133). Molinari suggests 12 areas where change is needed:

- (1) Multimodal and multilingual textual ecologies;
- (2) Academic writing as composition;
- (3) Academic texts must afford thinking;
- (4) University must take responsibility for academic misconduct and proctoring;
- (5) Re-think writing as a fallible proxy for representing knowledge;
- (6) Question the politics, ethics and ideology of writtenness;
- (7) Remind ourselves that clarity is often in the eye of the beholder;
- (8) Hold writing as a socio-academic practice to account;
- (9) Rethinking writing requires threshold concepts;
- (10) Change academic practices and standards;
- (11) *Ecrire*: Reclaiming the art of writing; and
- (12) Respect a writer’s right to flourish. (pp.134-149)

She concludes by saying again why it is worth treating academic texts as open systems: “to open up possibilities for re-configuring what makes them academic” (p.153), and that levers of change include the development of new pedagogies and access to relevant scholarship.

Signing Off

Molinari ends her book with a final note to her readers, addressing: “Where does all this leave us” (p.163). She summarizes the book chapters and leaves her readers with a set of questions she would like further research to investigate and that she hopes are the beginning of new conversations.

Afterword

The “Afterword” is provided by Suresh Canagarajah in support of Molinari’s project to democratize and pluralize academic writing. He calls, in the vein of Molinari, for more open and fair scholarly exchanges through academic publishing to create a collective human future where all scholars can have a voice.

The Review

What Makes Writing Academic is not a how-to-write book or a how-to-teach-writing one, rather it seeks to tease out a plurality of writing pedagogies, especially as levers for change. It is a book that challenges and supports its readers by offering an array of emergent humane approaches to conceptualizing the scholarship of writing that must take into account the historical evolution of academia itself—as well as the ontological roots and lived experiences of diverse students and teachers. It is an attempt to create a more socially just academia by approaching writing differently.

Molinari specifically situates this conceptualization of the teaching of writing within the realm of third space ancillary professionals, specifically English for Academic Practice (EAP) in the UK and Writing Composition Centers in the US. Molinari critiques particularly the rule bound (how to and how not to) writing approaches that emerge from such centers, and she draws attention to the notions of deficit students and inadequate writing practices that are similarly constructed by such approaches. However, by doing so, it is not entirely clear at whom the book is aimed: just the EAP practitioners that she encourages to do better or do differently, or discipline academics more generally. If the latter were more clearly addressed there would be a clear call to arms, and all those who teach academic writing would be more strongly positioned to resist revisionist pressures from government when they arise.

At the same time, there is a powerful strength in having this text primarily address writing as approached by EAP professionals. Situating the job of writing development in these ancillary services allows Molinari to highlight their fix-it approach with its focus on technics rather than meaning. The book is strong in making the case that *de facto* the approach to writing espoused and enacted by EAP has become the approach that informs the writing discourse in academia - from government to the Office for Students (in the UK); from managers to the atomised lecturer in their solitary classroom - albeit subliminally.

Molinari's strength lies in underscoring that the current approach to academic writing and academic writing practices emerges from a complex academic tradition that embraced a plurality of communicative and discursive modes. Reading the book allows us to conceptualize the university as a dynamic and porous system, something that has been and can be reflective, refractive and reflexive. It is the ahistoricity of the current moment that has lost the sense of the complexity and emergence of universities themselves. It is over time that academia and its practices have become more alphabet literate, rule bound and exclusive—particularly as they have theoretically become more open to diverse students.

The book provides food for thought with its rich, deep, and wide historical, theoretical, and philosophical explorations of what makes (or does not make) writing academic, encouraging change—individually and collectively—and also in the wider academic and societal systems. Change is essential to create a just and humane academia, and that is the fundamental premise of both Molinari's research and of this book. As such, the book provides useful foundations for a different future writing pedagogy (and scholarly activity), one that is able to dismantle the imperialist and colonialist ideologies about what students should know and how they should represent their knowledge. As Molinari states, academic writing can be different—in the interests of ethics and social justice it can become “a full-blown agent of change” (p.166).

References

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