

Demystifying Academic Writing: Reflections on Emotions, Know-How and Academic Identity

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ABSTRACT *Writing is the foundation of academic practice, yet academic writing is seldom explicitly taught. As a result many beginning (and experienced) academics struggle with writing and the difficult emotions, particularly the self-doubt, that writing stirs up. Yet it need not be like this. In this paper, strategies are discussed for attending to the emotions of writing, and developing writing know-how and a stronger sense of identity as a writer. It is argued that addressing all three aspects of writing—emotions, know-how and identity—helps demystify the academic writing process and helps novices on their journey to becoming academic writers.*

KEY WORDS: Academic writing, emotions, academic identity, writing know-how, voice

Introduction

Writing is the foundation of an academic career. From the initial PhD thesis to the writing of conference papers, journal articles and books, academics are—perhaps above all else—writers. But writing is an academic craft that is rarely explicitly taught (Blaxter *et al.*, 1998; DeLyser, 2003; Antoniou & Moriarty, 2008). As a result many beginning academic writers struggle, and not just with technical writing skills but with the emotions that writing stirs up and with the challenging process of developing a sense of self as an academic writer. Little wonder that the struggle to write can turn away aspirants and erode the confidence of those in the early stages of their career. Yet it need not be like this. As we discuss in this paper, there are strategies to help novices tackle the emotional ups and downs of writing, expand their knowledge of the writing process and undertake the related journey of becoming academic writers.

These strategies are based on two workshops we initially ran with graduate students and early career academics in 2005. We have continued to develop and refine these strategies by running additional writing workshops, talking with early career and more senior colleagues about their experiences of academic writing, reviewing published work on

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academic writing and incorporating the strategies into our own supervision and writing approaches.¹ So rather than present a detailed description of the initial writing workshops, we reflect on strategies developed in the context of these workshops and refined through our ongoing supervision and writing practices.² We offer the strategies for supervisors to consider in their own supervision and mentoring practices (whether individual supervision sessions, or group interventions such as writing workshops, writing groups, writing retreats and so on) and for those who struggle with writing (whether graduate students or academic staff).

Our interest in the craft of academic writing comes from our observations and experiences of the writing struggle. As human geographers and social scientists more generally we understand writing as a messy and iterative process of bringing ideas into being. We see our graduate students struggle with this process—with getting ideas onto the page in the first place and then refining and revising the ideas through rewriting. This struggle is not just familiar because we encounter it in almost every supervision session with graduate students; it is familiar because it is the same struggle we experience as writers. Indeed it was because of our struggles to write that we were initially interested in running a writing workshop as this offered us a way to understand more about the academic writing process. The struggle to write is also familiar because when we ask our colleagues about writing we also hear them talk about the difficulties of writing (and these are not just early or mid-career colleagues, but colleagues who are highly experienced and well published) (see also Cloke *et al.*, 2004, chapter 11).

To learn more about this struggle and how to address it academic writers can turn to some excellent publications on the process of scholarly writing (e.g. Huff, 1999; Craswell, 2005; Murray, 2005, 2006) and writing more generally (e.g. Elbow, 1981; King, 2000; Trimble, 2000; Williams, 2007). As well there are materials on academic writing interventions such as peer writing groups (Lee & Boud, 2003), writing programmes that foreground the feedback process (Caffarella & Barnett, 2000; Mullen, 2001), writing seminars (DeLyser, 2003) and writers' retreats (Grant & Knowles, 2000; Moore, 2003). However, these resources tend to focus on what we call writing 'know-how', ranging from technical knowledge about how to construct sentences and paragraphs to the more elusive understanding of techniques to get started, keep writing and approach rewriting. Less attention is paid to the emotions of writing, particularly the overwhelming emotions of fear and anxiety that can cripple early writing endeavours (but see Cloke *et al.*, 2004, chapter 11; Caffarella & Barnett, 2000; Lee & Boud, 2003). Perhaps even less is said about the critical shift in academic identity that novices need to make. This identity shift entails positioning oneself not as inexperienced student but as writer and academic with a legitimate voice and contribution (but see Grant & Knowles, 2000; Mullen, 2001). In contrast to most resources on academic writing which focus on one or two elements only, in this paper we present academic writing as an intertwining of three equally important elements—the emotions of writing, a sense of self as a writer and writing know-how—and we reflect on strategies for addressing all three.

We start with the challenge of academic writing, and explore why it is that beginning academic writers at the PhD and post-PhD level find the process such a struggle. Here we attend to the differences between undergraduate and graduate approaches to writing, and demonstrate why feelings of self-doubt inevitably accompany writing at the graduate level. We then elaborate strategies to help address these feelings of self-doubt (and the other challenging emotions that writing stirs up), as well as strategies to develop writing

know-how and a sense of self as an academic writer. By attending to all three aspects of writing we can help demystify the academic writing process.

The Challenge of Writing

Writing is a challenge for most writers, but for novices it is particularly challenging because they have limited experience of the writing process. They have not yet developed a more experienced writer's understanding of writing or ability to deal with the emotional pitfalls of writing. As a result writing can fill novices with feelings of dread and self-doubt.

Beginning academic writers tend to be familiar with an undergraduate model of writing that is far removed from the writing process most experienced academic writers use. Most undergraduate writing is based on a "static writing model" (Richardson, 2000, p. 924), a linear journey of doing research, and then writing up and reporting on findings. In this model, writing is the final "mopping-up activity" (p. 923) of communicating to an audience what the author already knows. This approach to writing presumes that language is an unproblematic medium through which we transmit reality. Experienced academic writers know otherwise. Experienced academic writers know that they create meaning through the messy business of writing and rewriting, or what Torrance and Thomas (1994) call the recursive model of writing. Thus theorists now talk of the "written-ness of research" (MacLure, 2003, p. 105), and writing as "a way of 'knowing'—a method of discovery and analysis", and a way of "'word[ing] the world' into existence" (Richardson, 2000, p. 923). For beginning academic writers this approach to writing can be daunting. When meaning starts to slip away it is all too easy for novices to doubt themselves, to believe that they do not understand the topic sufficiently or that they lack the necessary writing skills. Conversely, more experienced writers are familiar with the elusiveness of meaning, and how writing and rewriting bring ideas into being.

These feelings of self-doubt that beginning academic writers experience are compounded because the recursive nature of academic writing is largely hidden. Graduate students and early career academics are not usually exposed to other academics' draft work. They see academic work in its most finished form—the published refereed journal article or the published book—when all evidence of the recursiveness of writing, of the numerous iterations that a piece of writing usually goes through, has been obliterated. So working alone, and with others' polished work as the standard, it is not surprising that many novices become filled with self-doubt. They experience their own writing in all its messiness, while the work they are reading seems to spring fully formed onto the page. They can only compare their apparent lack of writing ability (and apparent lack of knowledge) with the seeming ease with which others produce publishable (and knowledgeable) works. Even early career academics who have finished their theses can still experience writing in this way. They are often not yet working within a network of collaborators and co-authors, an experience that will make clear to them that more experienced authors also struggle with writing.

Self-doubt is also generated through novices' own internal voices. As Elbow (1981) argues, the process of writing requires two conflicting skills—creating and criticizing. Elbow highlights how these skills are needed at different points in the writing process. In general creativity is needed to get words onto the page and criticism to revise these words. Yet beginning academic writers are more familiar with one of these skills—criticism. They have been well trained in undergraduate essays that ask them to 'Critically

discuss ...'. They will have had few opportunities to 'Creatively develop ...'. In addition, criticism is what characterizes the academic stance. Gibson-Graham (2006) for example highlights how so much academic thinking relies on a critical and judgemental stance, and how creativity is undermined by "impulses to squelch and limit" and the shutting down of possibilities, novelty and "half-baked ideas" (p. xxviii). Familiar with a context that seems to applaud and reward criticism it is easy to see how beginning academic writers struggle with the initial creative stage of getting ideas onto the page. The moment an idea is even half-formed on the page, the critical voice can step in too early calling into doubt the legitimacy of the idea (and the legitimacy of the writer) (see also Cloke *et al.*, 2004, p. 339).

Thus beginning academic writers face a considerable writing challenge. They are developing their understanding and practice of writing as a messy process of writing and rewriting that brings ideas into being, and can be thrown into turmoil when they cannot seem to 'get it right' the first time. They only have others' finished work to compare theirs with; generally they do not see the messy drafts of their peers and supervisors. And their own critical voice tends to be far stronger than their creative voice. More experienced writers have learned through practice that meaning is seldom already present but has to be created through multiple rewritings, and they have developed techniques for managing their critical and creative voices and allowing both to contribute to the writing process. Without this sort of procedural know-how, it is easy for beginning academic writers to become filled with self-doubt, anxiety and fear, and to feel as if they will never become the academic writers that others seem to be. In what follows we discuss strategies to help remedy this situation. These strategies are aimed at addressing the debilitating feelings beginning academic writers so often experience, developing academic writing know-how and ideally contributing to a stronger sense of self as an academic writer.

Confronting Writing Emotions

Human geographers (and researchers in other social science disciplines such as sociology) are increasingly attending to the role of emotions in the research process (e.g. Anderson & Smith, 2001; Bondi, 2005; Davidson *et al.*, 2005). Researchers show how geographers have not only silenced and ignored the emotions but even penalized expressions of emotion (e.g. Lorimer, 2003, p. 213). The discussions, however, largely focus on the emotions associated with the area of research study or the emotions of the researcher/researched relationship. By focusing on writing we can attend to emotions that are 'closer in', to emotions experienced in the intensely personal relationship with the self during the writing process.

Through our workshops, supervision sessions and discussions with graduate students and colleagues we consistently hear writing talked about in terms of disabling emotions like anxiety and fear. For example, Table 1 contains statements from one of the initial writing workshops when participants (12 graduate students and early career academics) brainstormed the challenges of writing. These academic novices spoke of the challenges by using words imbued with emotional weight, words like self-doubt, insecurity, intimidation, struggle, courage, exposure, fear, critique, judgement, approval and pressure. Participants also brainstormed writing highlights (identifying highlights like 'opportunity for creativity', 'solitude', 'a moment of learning'); however, the process of brainstorming challenges and highlights was very different. Participants found it easy to identify

Table 1. Examples of the challenges of writing

The challenges of writing	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-doubt • Insecurity • Intimidating to start (frightening) • Getting ideas • Are the ideas worth talking about? • Doubt about relevance of ideas • Struggle to accumulate material • Courage to ditch material • Lack of skills • Lack of confidence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proper construction of ideas • Own voice is exposing • Fear of critique • Judging/comparison in relation to other writers • Judging against other people • Marking and approval • Pressure of other people's expectations • Own judgement call

Source: Selected statements from a brainstorm on the challenges and highlights of writing by 12 participants at one writing workshop, September 2005.

challenges; the difficulties literally rolled off the tongue. Identifying the highlights was not so easy. There were silences. Some could not identify any highlights. Paradoxically, academic aspirants like the graduate students and early career academics at this writing workshop seem to dread the practice that is the very basis of the career and identity they desire.

One strategy for addressing this paradox is to provide opportunities for novices to both hear how others feel about writing and to express their own feelings that are too often silenced. In our writing workshops we tend to start with the simple exercise of asking participants to brainstorm writing highlights and challenges. Without fail, participants find it far easier to identify writing challenges (such as those in Table 1), but at the same time they are surprised and relieved to hear how their feelings about writing are shared by others. For example, Table 2 contains feedback from participants at the end of the two

Table 2. Feedback on brainstorming of writing highlights and challenges

At the end of the workshop:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [E]veryone struggles with writing • Everyone experiences the same self-doubt and struggles when writing as I do • [E]veryone, even experienced writers, can find writing a slow and at times painful experience • Everyone . . . experiences problems related to writing. So my case is not hopeless • Feelings of self-doubt and insecurity when trying/attempting to write are normal • The challenges, struggles, fears that I feel when thinking about writing are shared by many—this is reassuring • [A]ll writers are created equal. Experts and geniuses suffer from the same problems as me • I am not alone in my struggles

Three months after the workshop:

- I really enjoyed the beginning discussion about what we loved about writing and what we struggled with. *I actually found this really liberating* to know that *some of the experiences I have other people do too*. Because I find writing quite an isolating experience, it has made me feel more connected to other people (emphasis added)
 - I certainly felt better about myself as a writer after the workshop—all the issues and problems that I have seem to be shared with others
-

Source: Selected statements from feedback at the end of the writing workshops and three months later.

initial writing workshops and three months after each workshop.³ The comments highlight the depth of isolation and anxiety that writing can evoke. Participants ‘confess’ to having felt hopeless, abnormal and pain, and to having struggled with fear, insecurity and self-doubt. But the feedback also highlights how simple activities, like the brainstorming exercise, can have a powerful and revelatory impact, as participants find that their own fears about writing are shared by others.

The consistency of feelings like self-doubt, anxiety and fear around writing indicates that these are not individual attributes (or flaws). Indeed writers like Bondi (2005) caution against equating “emotion with individualized subjective experience” (p. 433). What, then, is the broader context for these feelings? What shapes these emotions of writing? Williams’s (1976) work on emotions as “structures of feelings” provides one insight. Williams shows how individually felt emotions are socially shaped by historical, political, economic, cultural and social conditions. In the academic context we might therefore understand individually felt emotions like self-doubt, anxiety and fear as shaped by the practices of critique, judgement and competition found, for example, in assessment tasks that range from the marking of undergraduate student work through to the ‘marking’ of colleagues through exercises such as the Research Assessment Exercise in the UK and Performance Based Research Funding in New Zealand. Bondi (2005) provides another insight. She argues that emotions can be thought of as both personal and relational, as something occurring between people. This approach draws our attention to the ‘betweenness’ of writing relationships such as the relationships between supervisor and graduate student, editor and author, reader and writer, colleague and colleague, for example. As supervisors who see the writing struggle of so many of our graduate students we are particularly interested in how the supervisor and graduate student relationship can impact on student writing. What do we say to graduate students about writing (and their writing in particular)? What do we not say? How do we say things about writing? This paper is part of our process of reflecting on what we as supervisors can bring to the betweenness of the supervisor/student relationship. And here Williams and Bondi contribute important insights that we combine. Williams provides an account that can help us understand the conditions under which we labour and how this is associated with a particular set or structure of familiar feelings, while Bondi reminds us that such feelings are part of what we bring (or transfer) to relationships such as the supervisor/student relationship.⁴

So in our relationships with graduate students we can provide opportunities where, rather than banishing emotions, we might talk of how we manage our feelings of self-doubt, fear, anxiety. Indeed, the point is not to erase difficult emotions from writing but to find in them their productive potential rather than paralysis.⁵ We can also acknowledge how we work in an academic context which, on the one hand, generates feelings that can block writing efforts while, on the other, demands that we write. Equally we can provide opportunities where other writing emotions might be spoken about such as creativity, absorption, excitement, even breakthrough, accomplishment and success. The opportunities for addressing these mixed emotions of writing include group settings like writing workshops, peer writing groups, writing seminars and writing retreats as well as the settings associated with each individual supervisor/graduate student relationship.

A second strategy for addressing the disabling emotions of writing is to get novices to confront the thing that they fear perhaps above all else: having their lack of skills and ability exposed. We can do this by getting novices to present their draft work early in

the writing process, when it is incomplete and when ideas are only partially formed. In the initial writing workshops we asked participants to bring along a draft piece of writing to swap with others. This exercise proved to be emotionally confronting, but also rewarding, as comments from the end of workshop feedback show:

[Exchanging drafts was] by far the most agonizing part of the workshop, but it was also extremely rewarding.

The sharing of writing was very, very powerful *and* painful. It was so great to get a totally different ‘take’ on the material I am grappling with. (emphasis in the original)

[I learned about] the value of exposing my worst writing to a sympathetic critic!

Bringing a piece of work to work on despite my apprehension about that—was very practical, gave a focus and a deadline to get something written!!

The initial feelings of dread are captured in words like agonizing, painful, exposing and apprehension. Caffarella & Barnett (2000) similarly found that participants in their writing programme felt intimidated by having to exchange draft work. One of their participants captured the fear by describing it as being “like an intellectual striptease” (p. 46).⁶ But even though participants in our workshops and in Caffarella and Barnett’s programme found it daunting and confronting they also found it a useful exercise, one that showed them the value of sharing writing at an early stage. For example, at the end of the writing workshops participants commented that they learned about “the value of exchanging material in whatever condition it is in” and “the importance of getting feedback on early drafts from a variety of perspectives”. And in the feedback three months after one of the workshops one participant noted how this lesson had not only stayed with them but how they were putting it into practice:

I realized . . . that I don’t let other people read my work until it is a fairly well polished draft . . . I am learning to let go of the need for something to be close to final draft before sharing with others—this has resulted in me feeling more free to change my ideas and to ditch concepts that aren’t working. And I also think that it makes people feel more confident to offer suggestions and criticisms as they don’t feel that they are reading a final draft that can’t be changed in a substantial or significant way. So now I am getting much better value out of the feedback . . . as people are more willing to raise questions or to debate issues with me which in turn improves the quality of what I write and the strength of my argument.

Others found value in being able to see others’ draft-quality work: “Reading other people’s work and seeing it wasn’t much better than mine was reassuring”; “Reading another person’s draft work—would have liked to read more—seeing things in draft (apart from own work) is relatively rare”.

The feedback from participants, particularly about their emotional vulnerability, has alerted us to some important cautions around encouraging novices to share work that is at an early stage. In a group setting, pairing less with more experienced writers offers important learning opportunities about receiving and giving feedback that novices may not get if they are paired with other beginners. But this can exacerbate less experienced

writers' anxiety. Indeed, several graduate student participants from the first writing workshop identified that they had found it daunting to be paired with more experienced academic staff, so at the second workshop we altered the programme so that participants at a similar academic stage (i.e. Masters, PhD and post-PhD) debriefed with each other after the exercise. The emotionally confronting aspect of exchanging drafts needs also to be acknowledged. Following Caffarella and Barnett (2000) we endorse the idea that the emotions—"good and bad"—need to be discussed beforehand as a "legitimate and healthy" part of the process of swapping drafts and giving and receiving feedback (p. 49). We have also found that participants needed to be encouraged to bring genuine early drafts and not finished or near finished work. This is important so that all participants are in a sense exposed on as 'equitable' terms as possible. In both group settings and one-on-one settings it is important to give quality feedback. In the initial workshops and in our ongoing supervision and writing practice we use the guidelines offered by Gottschalk and Hjortshoj (2004, pp. 69–71) on how to respond to draft work. They suggest strategies like *describing* what an author has done rather than prescribing what they should do, *describing the experience* of reading the draft, finding material in the draft itself that might provide the basis for rewriting, and limiting editorial changes.⁷

In our experience novice academic writers find writing an emotionally daunting task, one that is characterized by feelings of fear, anxiety and self-doubt. We believe that it is important to confront rather than ignore these emotions, so that novices are not left on their own to contend with feelings that can erode confidence and paralyse writing ability. To confront the difficult writing emotions we suggest two strategies. The first is to reassure novices that their feelings are shared by others, both novice and experienced writers; and the second is to give writers (novice and experienced) practice in confronting their worst fears about writing.

Learning Writing Know-How

Earlier we proposed that graduate students and even early career academics find academic writing difficult because they are more familiar with the static undergraduate model of writing than the recursive model of writing used by most academic writers; and because they are more familiar with academic criticism than academic creativity. But there are strategies for developing procedural writing know-how (that is know-how about the recursive and creative features of the academic writing process). As well there are strategies for developing a second type of writing know-how: technical know-how (such as structuring an argument; sentence and paragraph construction; use of passive and active voice).

Procedural Know-How

We have already discussed one way to develop procedural know-how concerning the recursive nature of academic writing, that is by having novices share draft work that is in an early stage of development. As we found in the writing workshops, this type of exercise can help demonstrate to novices that writers inevitably start with a rough draft that goes through not just one or two but numerous iterations in order to generate and clarify ideas and arguments. In the writing workshops we prefaced this exercise with storytelling, taking participants through the procedural know-how we put into practice when

developing one piece of writing (such as how we deal with writer's block; how we move between processes of reading, writing and thinking; how much we rewrite not just in terms of the number of drafts but the degree of difference between drafts; and even how we use techniques like having a regular and disciplined writing schedule, but also making sure that we get away from the computer, especially for regular exercise and regular breaks). This exercise of telling the usually invisible back-stage story of how a piece of published writing is created is a way of reassuring novices that writing involves false starts and dead ends, and that these apparent diversions and failures are not mistakes to be eliminated from the writing process but are constitutive of writing. In another exercise we took participants through a summary of a paper in each of its versions showing how the title and section and sub-section headings changed as the piece went through multiple drafts (and particularly how the changing titles and headings reflected the move from description to argument). These strategies to demonstrate the recursive nature of writing were commented on by participants at the writing workshops (see Table 3). These comments show first how novices are grappling with the shift from a linear or "static writing model" (Richardson, 2000, p. 924) to the recursive approach used by experienced writers, and second how novices welcome learning about procedural know-how as a way of making this transition. For us this is a strong indication of how important it is to expose novices to the recursive nature of writing, whether through the sorts of exercises we used in the writing workshops or by other means such as writing groups, and giving students copies of our own initial drafts of published material (in workshops or during supervision sessions).

Along with procedural know-how regarding the recursive approach to academic writing, novices are also developing their creative voice, a voice needed to balance the more familiar critical voice when initially generating ideas, and when reworking ideas and restructuring writing in the recursive process. Paradoxically this creative voice can be developed by mimicry. One form of mimicry is to copy the techniques that others recommend. Trimble (2000), for example, discusses various strategies for fostering

Table 3. Feedback on procedural know-how regarding the recursive nature of academic writing

At the end of the workshop:

- [D]rafting is important—it won't come out perfect the first time
 - Practice makes it perfect. More drafts and more reviews help to improve the quality
 - Be brave, be bold—there is always chance for another draft
 - [I]t isn't all over when you've got the first draft out . . . it is necessary to rewrite and not necessarily painful—[I'm] trying to embrace the process instead of hating it!
 - [I learned about] the relationship between thinking and writing (writing as generating ideas)
 - [I learned about] going from data to theory and back again, and how I might be able to vary my usual way of working which tended to be rather linear
 - [I learned about] other people's ideas and difficulties and how they addressed them, e.g. going backwards and forwards between theory and data
-

Three months after the workshop:

- I would also say that I relish the actual writing process more since the workshop. I worry less about taking time to chew on ideas, but I also don't wait till I have *all* the ideas to start writing . . . I guess I now think about the research *and* the writing—not just writing as the presentation of research, but writing as producing something someone else might hopefully engage with and enjoy
-

Source: Selected statements from feedback at the end of the writing workshops and three months later.

creativity in writing, including free writing, zero drafting and note pasting. In the writing workshops participants prepared by reading sections of this work beforehand and then during the workshop they worked in small groups discussing the various techniques put forward by Trimble. This is also the sort of material that can be recommended to novices to read. A second form of mimicry is to imitate what others do in their writing. In terms of fostering the creative voice this can involve reading others' writing not for content, but for how the authors write, for how they present and progress their ideas and arguments. In the writing workshops we did this by asking participants to prepare beforehand by selecting a piece of academic writing that they particularly 'loved and adored', and identifying why. In discussing these pieces of writing during the workshops participants commented on features that we expect in academic writing such as clarity of writing and argument, and the seamless integration of research data with theory, but they also commented on more unexpected creative elements—the use of humour, the use of evocative (and sometimes provocative) language, and how authors made readers feel included as part of a conversation. This reading strategy is a way of opening out the writing repertoire of novices (and more experienced writers) and developing their confidence to compose and express ideas and arguments with a more creative voice—and ear.

Three months after the workshops participants gave feedback that provides an insight into how they are developing their creative voice:

I've become much more reflective of my own writing practice—much more aware of what I'm doing, and how I might do things differently. For example, I am now much more confident to start in the middle of a piece rather than feeling like I have to have a perfect introduction before I can move on. I feel a bit more playful about how I write.

I have also tried to use language a little more playfully to make it interesting for the reader (we'll see how that goes).

In the first comment, the participant points to the use of creativity in the process of generating ideas, describing how they approach the writing task in a more creative and playful way. In the second comment, the participant points to the use of creativity in the process of rewriting, describing how they are more willing to experiment with forms of expression (and through this play with words the participant is also refining meaning). This feedback from participants as well as our own reflections on writing suggest that there are opportunities to foster creativity in academic writing, both when initially generating ideas and then when writing recursively to develop these ideas.

Technical Know-How

A second form of writing know-how involves technical knowledge. Although this was not something we covered in the initial writing workshops, we have run additional writing workshops to develop technical skills, with one workshop being designed around Bonnett's (2001) discussion of constructing arguments and another designed around Williams's (2007) guidance on writing clearly and gracefully. These workshops have provided the basis for fruitful ongoing discussions with graduate students in individual

supervision sessions as we work with them to refine and clarify their ideas and arguments. However, we strongly believe that when addressing technical writing know-how it is important to be cognisant of not only the emotional struggles that many beginning academic writers experience but the tenuous process of developing a sense of self as a writer (the focus of the next section).⁸

Becoming Academic Writers

In this section we turn to the third aspect of writing that we see as critical to the academic writing process—developing a sense of self as an academic writer. Developing an identity and voice as an academic writer results from the process of coming to terms with writing emotions and developing procedural and technical writing know-how. Even so, we believe there are strategies that can help novices establish a surer sense of themselves as academic writers.

One way we can help develop this sense of self as a writer is to position novices as academic writers. For example, in the workshop exercise when we asked novices to read how rather than what others write, novices are being positioned as legitimate authors who can read and engage with others' published works on writerly and authorial terms. Through this type of exercise we, in Althusserian terms, interpellated, or hailed, novices as academic writers (Althusser, 1972). Butler (1997, p. 160) summarizes interpellation as a theory that “appears to stage a social scene in which a subject is hailed, the subject turns around, and the subject then accepts the terms by which he or she is hailed”. In the original, Althusser describes the subject as being hailed by a figure of authority in the form of a police officer. Even if we take Butler's less literal reading of interpellation (the idea of a subject who is constituted through a twofold process of being called and accepting that call) the theory highlights several things that are going on in the context of interventions like the writing workshops. The workshops create a social scene where there are others to act as witnesses to the call and its acceptance, and where an authority figure associated with an established order (a supervisor) hails participants as writers. For us this points to the limits of relying only on published material to guide novice academic writers; in reading there is no social scene and no direct call from an authority figure, and therefore no opportunity for novices to accept the call and to have their acceptance witnessed.

In the three-month feedback one participant commented on how they were using this reading strategy and in a sense continuing to hail themselves as an academic writer: “[I have been] paying more attention to how other writers construct their work. After the workshop I am more aware that I should be taking the opportunity offered by my reading to not only learn about the ideas, but how people construct their arguments and how they write”. Focusing on how authors write can have powerful effects. As already noted, workshop participants identified that one of the features they appreciated about the writing they loved and adored was how authors made them feel included as part of a conversation. In other words, participants perceived how their chosen authors were thinking of readers, whereas in their struggle to write participants tended to think of themselves. For workshop participants this led to the critical realization that they could turn their attention away from their struggle to write and think of their readers. Some participants commented on this realization in their feedback at the end of the workshops, for example: “[I learned about the] importance of the reader—of being much more aware of the audience and that this may mean being less self-focused in parts of the writing process” and “[I learned about]

the whole angle of writing struggles as self-centred and yet our appreciation of good writing depended on being addressed appropriately as the reader". Participants continued to comment on this in the three month-feedback, for example: "I now think of the audience more. It never occurred to me before the workshop to do that. I think this has made my writing more readable, and made me think about the structure of my thesis in terms of the audience". Unexpectedly, by interpellating novices as writers and by getting them to focus on how others write, they were able to turn away from their own struggle to write and think of their readers and how they might better engage with them.

A second way we can position novices as academic writers is to show them that they are *already* doing the things that academic writers do. Through the storytelling and discussion of procedural know-how we could highlight how the things that participants perceived as writing problems were essential to the academic writing process. So participants were reassured that concerns and fears (such as not being able to write a perfect first draft, or writing 'into a corner' and therefore having to rethink the whole argument) that made them feel as if they were not successful academic writers were the very things that experienced academic writers do to create meaning. Again this led to a critical realization for some participants, with one participant stating, 'bad writing is part of the process of doing good writing' (see also DeLyser, 2003, pp. 170–172).

Strategies that position novices as academic writers can, we believe, help beginning academic writers develop a stronger sense of their legitimate voice and contribution. It is striking that in the three-month feedback participants commented on how they were developing the confidence to project their own voice, rather than relying on and even hiding behind the voices of others (see Table 4). These comments are evidence of participants' shift in sense of self and a strengthening academic identity.

But there was a second refrain in the three-month feedback. Some participants also commented on how old feelings, practices and ways of thinking were reasserting themselves:

Table 4. Feedback three months after the workshop on a developing identity as academic writer

Three months after the workshop:

- The workshop was a turning point for me as a PhD student and a writer. I think it was the first time that the idea of *taking authorship* hit home—in terms of selecting both *which* data/literature I will refer to, and *how* I will use it in my writing (original emphasis)
 - When I write I am regularly checking in with myself that I am writing in my voice and not someone else's. I have been doing this to the chapter I have been rewriting. I am focusing on presenting my argument. To do this, I have completely restructured the chapter. *I have brought my argument up front*, and let the literature substantiate my argument (emphasis added)
 - The writing workshop has made me *feel more confident* about approaching writing. I am currently re-writing the chapter, which was reviewed by two people during the workshop. Prior to the workshop I was at a bit of a standstill with it. I was putting off working on it and always finding other things to do. The feedback from reviewers was really constructive and directional, and the discussions in the workshop have *given me more confidence* to just get in and write and edit now ... *I feel braver* than I have before about writing, about *putting my voice up front* (emphasis added)
 - It is comforting to know that *others also struggle to use their own voice*. I also think that it has encouraged me not give into the temptation to believe that I can't express an idea as well as someone else has done before—I don't need to rely so heavily on quotations, *I have something to say as well* and it will flow better with my ideas if I use my own words (emphasis added)
-

Source: Selected statements from feedback three months after the writing workshops.

At first, yes [the workshop affected my writing practice]. I was working on something that I felt much better about revisiting and editing, which has always been my problem. Talking about that process at the workshop was helpful at first but *I think I've lapsed back into my old paranoia about rewriting.* (emphasis added)

Initially after the workshop I was writing fairly regularly (3–4 times a week), but I have found that that has *slipped back* (to not at all!). More regular contact would help with this ... (emphasis added)

I'd have to say that this far down the track that I've *lost* most of the good intentions I had straight afterwards! (emphasis added)

Follow-up contact would be helpful. I find it hard to stay motivated!

These comments highlight how the journey of becoming an academic writer, of managing the emotions and developing know-how is ongoing work, and that while one writing intervention is helpful, novices need further support—which may be delivered through forums like writing groups or writing workshops or through individual supervision sessions. It is also worth noting that in her discussion of Althusser's theory of interpellation Butler (1997) emphasizes the importance of repetition. One call is never enough to constitute the subject, rather the subject must be called over and over.

Conclusion

Caffarella and Barnett (2000, p. 39) refer to the “seemingly mysterious process of scholarly writing”. We have argued that, particularly for novice academic writers, this process is mysterious largely because important aspects of academic writing tend to be ignored, assumed, and/or learned by trial and error in the training to become an academic. This situation feeds, in powerful ways, the often crippling self-doubt that beginning academic writers experience. They do not know that struggling with writing is common because, generally, they have not had opportunities to discuss the writing process with other academics. They do not understand that the recursive nature of academic writing entails initial messiness and failure because they see only the finished product of other academics' work and not the process by which that work came to be. They are overwhelmed by their own internal critical voice and are yet to develop techniques for fostering academic creativity. As a result, graduate students and early-career academics often struggle with claiming an identity as an academic writer.

Based on two initial workshops with beginning academic writers we have identified strategies that can help novices understand more about academic writing and their relationship with writing. One strategy is to confront and talk about rather than ignore the difficult emotions that writing stirs up. This can result in two potentially enabling insights for beginning academic writers. They learn that their feelings are not extraordinary but commonplace, and therefore not something to be anxious about. And by finding that their feelings are shared by more experienced writers, novices learn that difficult emotions need not get in the way of writing, can be managed rather than erased and might even be productive in the writing process. The second strategy is to explicitly address procedural know-how and expose what goes on in the writing process. This provides novices with

information about strategies for productive writing, and assures them that what they currently perceive as failings (such as having to write and rewrite multiple times) are the very means for producing good writing. Novices learn that they are not deficient or lacking in skills but doing exactly what experienced writers do. Related to this, the third strategy is to interpellate or hail novices as academic writers—to use social settings, such as writing workshops, where novices, in the presence of others, take on tasks as if they were already experienced writers (for example, to read the work of an admired author not as a student seeking wisdom, but as a one writer inquiring into how another writer writes). The feedback from participants suggests that the combination of these three strategies helps develop a stronger sense of self and ability as academic writers. However, the feedback also highlights how this process is tenuous, and how important it is to mobilize these strategies on an ongoing basis both in group settings (such as writing workshops or writing groups) and in individual supervision sessions.

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Notes

- ¹ We have also incorporated these strategies into undergraduate teaching. And while writing needs to be explicitly addressed at the undergraduate level, in this paper we are concerned with the practice and struggle of academic writing at the graduate and early career level, when what is at stake is an academic vocation and identity.
- ² A few comments on the workshops are, however, necessary. The first workshop was run in June 2005 at Otago University, New Zealand by all three authors (and with eight participants); and the second workshop was run in September 2005 at Griffith University, Queensland, Australia by the first author (and with 12 participants). For more information about the format of the initial and subsequent workshops, readers can contact the first author.
- ³ At the end of the initial workshops participants were asked four questions: (1) What are three things you have learned from this workshop? (2) What have you got most out of the workshop and/or what are some things you might put into practice? (3) What were (up to) three things/activities/aspects that worked well during the workshop? (4) What were (up to) three things/activities/aspects that would need to be changed for future workshops? The three-month feedback followed a similar format asking participants to comment on: overall impact of the workshop on their writing approach; specific impacts on actual writing practice; activities or discussions from the workshop that stand out, and why changes should be made to the workshop (and any extra comments). All participants provided feedback at the end of the workshops and 11 of the 20 participants provided three-month feedback. The feedback process was approved by the human research ethics committees from Griffith University and the University of Otago. Given the requirement for anonymity we cannot tell whether comments are from graduate students or early career academics.
- ⁴ Which is not to say that such feelings are immutable. In her discussion of the person-centred approach to therapy, Bondi reminds us of people's capacity for change particularly through reflection and self-understanding (2005, pp. 441–442). As we are suggesting in this paper, intensive writing experiences (such as writing workshops, writing groups and writing retreats) offer a context for reflecting on and potentially generating new self-understandings about the experience of writing and its associated emotions.
- ⁵ We thank one reviewer for this insight.

- ⁶ These comments strike a chord with Boler's concept of a "pedagogy of discomfort" (1999). Boler uses the concept to reflect on how racism and homophobia might be addressed by getting students to question learned beliefs and assumptions, an exercise that invariably leads students to confront their fear of losing personal and cultural identity. In the context of writing, the pedagogy of discomfort means that novices have to confront their fear of loss of academic identity as their draft work (and potentially their lack of skill and lack of knowledge) is exposed to another (whether in the context of a group event like a writing workshop or in the one-on-one supervisory relationship).
- ⁷ Workshop participants highlighted how useful these guidelines were, with feedback such as "Really useful ways to think about responding to . . . writing besides copy-editing and 'telling' or prescribing".
- ⁸ It is therefore no coincidence that this section is so brief. In contrast with many other publications which primarily attend to technical writing know-how, we want to highlight how important it is also to address writing emotions and academic identity.

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