

1-1-2002

Review: Student Writing

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Recommended Citation

Ganobcsik-Williams, Lisa (2002) "Review: Student Writing," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 22 : Iss. 2, Article 7.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1506>

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Reviews

**Lillis, Theresa M. *Student Writing: Access, Regulation, Desire*.
London and New York: Routledge, 2001.**

Reviewed by Lisa Ganobcsik-Williams

“I’ve never experienced talking to anyone about my essays before, so I find it very interesting and I appreciate—Nobody’s ever sat down and talked to me about my essays. They’ve just said, ‘oh, hard to fathom at times’.” (British university student’s comment in discussion with Theresa Lillis 132)

A central contention of Theresa Lillis’ *Student Writing: Access, Regulation, Desire* is that British university education does not offer enough opportunities for discussing student writing. Unlike universities and colleges in the United States, UK institutions do not run first-year Composition courses or General Studies Writing sequences. “Academic Writing” is a new and developing field, and few writing programs currently exist. Interest in some US models of tertiary writing instruction, such as Writing Across the Curriculum and Writing in the Disciplines, is growing, but recent.

Lillis explains this new interest in teaching students to write in terms of access. Tracing student numbers back to the 1930s, she points out that since the binary between “polytechnics” and traditional universities was abolished by the British government in 1992 (allowing polytechnics to claim university title and status), and an increased emphasis was put onto making higher education more accessible, there has been a huge growth in the number of students entering British universities. As women, older students, ethnic minorities, and part-time and working-class students are finding more open routes to higher education (17-20), the student population of UK universities is becoming much more diverse. Although there is widening access for students from historically excluded social groups, however, Lillis argues that “current institutional practices may be limiting their participation” (161). Through what she labels “the institutional practice of mystery,” Lillis contends that British universities fail “to teach the conventions of the literacy practice [primarily essay writing] [that they] demand” (161).

The Writing Center Journal, Volume 22, Number 2, Spring/Summer 2002

Lillis' book is a breath of fresh air and a product of new research into academic writing as a social practice. Her work is informed by the Academic Literacies Research Group, a forum for scholars of writing and literacy that regularly meets at the Institute of Education in London. It is also indebted to the research framework of "Academic Literacies" outlined by Brian Street and Mary Lea. Recent collections by Academic Literacies scholars, *Student Writing in Higher Education: New Contexts*, edited by Mary Lea and Barry Stierer, and *Students Writing in the University: Cultural and Epistemological Issues*, edited by Carys Jones, Joan Turner, and Brian Street, argue that writing is a process of meaning-making, and that students need to write in order to discover, negotiate, and develop ideas. As Lillis notes, Academic Literacies research emphasizes that "collaboration and negotiation are central to the teaching of writing," and that "the ideological nature of institutional practices and the ways in which decisions about meaning making in [student] texts are always bound up with socially structured relations of power and of identity" (167).

Student Writing: Access, Regulation, Desire focuses on research Lillis conducted through talking with students one-to-one about their essay writing. The point of this research was to develop strategies for discussing writing on an individual basis with students, and to analyze the outcomes of such discussions in order to support the claim that British university teachers need to work more closely with students on developing their written texts. Lillis's conferences with students demonstrate that "[I]t is important that as tutors we constantly acknowledge th[e] partial, and gradual, impact of tutor/student talk on text construction, as well as the unfinished nature of student-writers' 'final drafts'" (144). Although Lillis concentrates her analysis on student interaction with British university *tutors*, what she means in American terms is university *teachers*. Because of this language confusion, readers immersed in the culture of US writing center work are likely to read an ulterior meaning into the book from the outset: while Lillis is making a case specifically for student/teacher dialogue about writing, American Compositionists will see the applicability of her discussion for dialogue between students and writing center tutors.

American readers will also be interested to realize that writing centers are not a component of British higher education. Lillis is quick to dismiss American, Australian, and South African writing centers as offering a skills and surface solutions model (20-23). Her reluctance to consider the idea of writing center work is shared by many UK academics and administrators, who object to the concept of one-to-one writing tutorials because they perceive such tutorials as remedial,

but also because individualized tutorials bring to mind the traditional elitist model of British higher education: “The teaching of disciplinary knowledge and academic literacy practices in the traditional elite system of education in the UK has been built on the notion and practice of inducting small numbers of privileged students into the ways of the academy,” Lillis explains (54). This old-style model of student mentoring at institutions such as Oxford and Cambridge is, theoretically and in terms of funding, in opposition to the concept of access for which Lillis is arguing.

That Lillis overlooks the possibilities that writing center tutoring holds for close discussion of student writing is ironic, however, because the pedagogical strategies she creates as a result of her individualized discussions with student writers are directly applicable to writing center tutorials. Lillis develops the concept of “talkback,” for instance, while making “an attempt to consciously listen to what the student-writers were saying and to bring their concerns and interests to the centre of our subsequent discussions” (147). As someone knowledgeable about essay-writing processes and conventions, Lillis conducted individual, on-going conversations with a number of student writers, and developed process-oriented “talkback” strategies to replace “feedback,” which she defines as teacher commentary on the final product: students’ completed essays. “Talkback,” Lillis explains, is a method through which teachers can base their responses to an essay-in-progress on specific concerns the student has expressed, and can use these concerns to pose questions back to the student (148). In turn, “[t]alkback provides student writers with the opportunity to respond to, and question, tutor comments, as well as to articulate their criticism of dominant [academic writing] conventions” (169).

Writing center tutors will find useful Chapter Six, “Dialogues of Participation,” which provides a detailed discussion of four kinds of talkback strategies:

1. *Talking writers into essayist literacy* is teacher [or tutor]-directed talk, which helps a student to learn and practice conventions of academic essay writing.
2. *Talking to “populate with intention”* is collaborative dialogue, which helps to identify a student’s voice in his or her writing and which encourages the student to choose which voices to emphasize or erase.
3. *Talking to make language visible* is teacher [or tutor]-directed talk, which helps a student to identify and use certain linguistic

features of his or her own writing.

4. *Dialogue to facilitate student “talkback” as part of “long conversations”* involves conversing over weeks and months with a student about his or her writing, with the aim of opening up “questions about the relationships between language, social identity, and institutional practices. A talkback space allows for such interconnections to be explored and thus explicitly brought into debates with student writers” (147).

Student Writing: Access, Regulation, Desire concludes by providing suggestions for exploring “possible future ways of teaching and learning academic writing in H[igher] E[ducation] in the UK,” and at this point gestures toward the idea of peer tutoring: “I have . . . suggested that ‘expert’ . . . [teachers] can mediate ‘novice’ students’ participation in essayist literacy by actively talking them into this practice. The extent and ways in which these dialogues could be facilitated through other/additional means needs to be explored—for example, by more expert students scaffolding novices’ learning” (160, 168). The focus of *Student Writing: Access, Regulation, Desire*, however, remains firmly on student/teacher talk about essays in subject area courses. Lillis is careful to keep her discussion away from “study support” (22), the category under which writing centers would presumably fall. Rather than risk her talkback framework being pushed aside as a writing support issue, Lillis underlines the potential of talkback to inform mainstream teaching practice in British universities.

Lillis emphasizes that “decisions about student writing pedagogy involve questions about the project of higher education itself: What is it for? Who is it for? Which practices are to be valued, and why?” The kinds of writing required and the teaching of such writing “cannot be thought of as an adjunct to the ‘mainstream’ curriculum or pedagogy, but rather are integral to our aims in, and for, higher education” (167). This call to rethink the larger purposes of student writing in British institutions raises a number of questions for writing center tutors and administrators in the United States and other countries. How does writing center work relate to the aims Lillis suggests? For example, is Lillis’ goal of changing the university structure to help students gain access to other kinds of literacy practices the goal of writing center tutoring? Should it be? To what extent are writing centers involved in the project of ensuring that subject teachers regularly discuss writing with students?

By examining, through a framework of student access, how introducing the teaching of writing calls into question the structure and goals of university teaching, *Student Writing: Access, Regulation, Desire* offers writing center administrators and tutors a fresh perspective on the purposes underlying writing tutoring and on the effects it can achieve.

A Brief Selection: Publications of International Scholars

Baynham, M. *Literacy Practices: Investigating Literacy in Social Contexts*. London: Longman, 1995.

Becher, T. *Academic Tribes and Territories: Intellectual Inquiry and the Cultures of Disciplines*. London: Longman, 1995.

Clark, R., and R. Ivanic. *The Politics of Writing*. London: Routledge, 1997.

Dysthe, O. *Writing and Talking to Learn*. Tromsø: Unikom, University of Tomsø, 1996.

Ivanic, R. *Writing and Identity: The Discoursal Construction of Identity in Academic Writing*. Amsterdam; Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1998.

Student Writing in Higher Education: New Contexts. Ed Mary R. Lea and Barry Stierer. Buckingham: Society for Research into High Education and Open UP, 2000.

Writing as a Learning Tool: Intergrating Theory and Practice. Ed. P. Tynjala, L. Mason, and K. Lonka. Dordrecht, the Netherlands: Kluwer, 1997

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