

1-1-2002

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Theresa Lillis

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Recommended Citation

Lillis, Theresa (2002) "Local Research Contexts and International Conversations," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 23 : Iss. 1, Article 10.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1559>

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*Local Research Contexts and International Conversations:
A Response to Lisa Ganobcsik-Williams' Review of Student Writing:
Access, Regulation, Desire (Writing Center Journal, 22.2: 85-89.)*

by Theresa Lillis

I was pleased to receive a copy of Lisa Ganobcsik-Williams' review in *The Writing Center Journal* of my book on the experience of "non-traditional" students and their writing in UK higher education. As researchers and teachers, most of us are interested in sharing ideas across geographical, institutional and cultural contexts: indeed the Spring/Summer issue of *The Writing Center Journal* with articles from diverse cultural contexts is testament to this commitment. However, Lisa's review also reminded me that however much we live in a globalized society, one aspect of which means that we are increasingly able to engage in international discussions, we must also acknowledge the central significance in our work of "the local"—that is the local contexts of our research, understandings and conversations.

I say this because I think that while Lisa's review is generally a fair representation of the main themes of my book, there were some comments that puzzled me. On reflection I think such puzzlement can, to a large extent, be explained by our different understandings about the local contexts and conversations in which my research and writing, indeed any research and writing, are taking place. So it is in the spirit of furthering international dialogue across distinct local contexts, that I am responding to some of her specific comments here.

Lisa comments that "Lillis is quick to dismiss American, Australian and South African writing centers as offering a skills and surface solutions model" (86).

There are two issues I'd like to raise here; the first is to do with practice and the provision of writing support, and the second more theoretical, relating to theories of language, learning and participation. First, I do not actually discuss writing centres in the book: they are not part of the UK institutional landscape, so they did not arise in my research on students' experiences. This is a part of a broader yet fundamental point which is that the institution-

About the Author

Theresa Lillis is a lecturer in language and education at the Center for Language and Communications at the Open university in the Uk. Her research interests focus on academic literacy practices and participation in higher education. Currently she is involved in a research project exploring the academic literacy practices of scholars in Slovakia, Hungary and Spain.

al contexts relating to writing provision are completely different in the US and the UK in terms of history, disciplinary background of teachers, scale, and diversification of provision. Thus, for example, whereas in the US there is a range of provision, not least, Freshman Composition, Basic Writing, Writing Centers, WAC, TESOL, all aimed at quite specific student groups—and often within a hierarchy in terms of the status of students and staff—no such range of provisions and their associated histories exist in the UK. There is some writing specific provision in the UK, and although debates around such provision are growing, this continues to be very small. The students I was writing about are typical of most students in higher education in the UK in that they receive no specific writing teaching. So the institutional context about which I was writing did not involve any specific writing provision, including that in the form of writing centers.

Second, where I do make a brief reference to writing centers, it is in a list of the kinds of writing-specific provision that exist in different contexts. I include such a list in order to inform readers, mainly in the UK, that very different institutional practices exist elsewhere. However, I explain why I am critical of the philosophy of language and meaning making that much (if not most) specific language/writing provision tends to represent, and often enacts on three counts. The problems and hence solutions surrounding students' academic writing are construed as being overwhelmingly textual. I find Bruce Horner's critique of the "textual bias" of much basic writing provision very useful here (Horner). Within this framing, the language of the academy remains invisible; the language of the disciplines remains invisible, as a "given," while the language of students is problematized. Also, again because of the overarching framing of writing as a textual phenomenon, both the problem and the solution are often portrayed as being relatively straightforward to identify and resolve. In contrast, the social practice view of writing advocated in my book (echoing work elsewhere both in the UK and the US) advances a view of language as meaning making, which places issues of power and identity at the center of any debate about the teaching and learning of writing. Thus, what I am critical of are institutional and pedagogical approaches underpinned by a view of language which ignores such complexity.

Lisa also writes, "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" (86).

Many UK teacher/researchers (as do many in the US, see Rose; Hull and Rose) certainly object to a "remedial" approach to the teaching of language and literacy—that is where the

language of the student is problematized yet where the language and literacy demands of the curriculum are not the focus of explicit attention, and the disciplinary conventions themselves not held up for scrutiny. However, it is incorrect to say that I and other "social practice"-oriented teacher/researchers in the UK object to one-to-one tutorials. At no point do I suggest that one-to-one tutorials are by their nature "remedial." In fact, I argue strongly that students desperately desire connection with their tutors (I mean here their discipline-specific teachers/lecturers), and on the basis of extensive dialogues with students I suggest, as Lisa points out, different kinds of one-to-one dialogue which seem to respond to these desires.

Lisa further notes that I (and others) object to one-to-one writing tutorials "because individualized tutorials bring to mind the traditional elitist model of British higher education" (87).

Again I think there is some confusion here. In general terms, I am arguing strongly for widening access to higher education. I also think that many students (and indeed teachers) would like to experience the kind of opportunities that were made available to the small elite of the past. In the traditional elitist model of higher education, where up until quite recently only 10% of the UK population went to university, there were lots of opportunities for one-to-one discussions with tutors and small group discussion with other students, which included commentary and discussion about writing. It was assumed, for the most part correctly, that the small, homogenous student population would simply breathe in through this atmosphere of close contact with experts in academic fields what they needed to know about writing. In the new context, many students would like such opportunities but the resources are not available. The UK government's aim to increase participation in higher education to 50% of the population by 2010 is not matched by a funding system which would enable practices from the old elite system to continue. Thus, opportunities for one-to-one tutorials and, by implication, a model of learning as implicit induction, is not available to students in most universities today. So what do we do? I think one thing we mustn't do is to assume that there are any simple solutions: questions about how writing should be taught, what kind of writing should be taught and for what purpose are part of a much bigger debate about the nature and function of a mass higher education system at the turn of the twenty first century in the UK. And it is in this respect that I worry about any specific writing provision being viewed as a "good idea" simply because it already exists. I am genuinely concerned that UK policy makers and administrators might look to the US for "ready

made" programs which are outside of, even, marginalized from, mainstream disciplinary teaching and learning rather than engage in a more complex debate about the relationship between language, participation, teaching and learning.'

I am aware of the wealth of teaching and researching writing experience in the US, and I have personally hugely benefited from reading about and listening to many US researchers, theorists and teachers. I am also familiar with some of the many debates surrounding writing provision in the US, including the vexed question of whether there should be a "universal requirement" for writing instruction at all (for example, Petraglia; Crowley), where and how writing should be taught (for example, Russell; Harris) and how "non-traditional students are often positioned by the academy (for example, Lu; Horner). What I hope is that UK policy makers, researchers and teachers, will begin to engage in some of these debates in order to develop a pedagogy which matches the aspirations of the growing number of higher education students.

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