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Introduction

Rethinking the Structures of Academic Writing in the Times of Exacerbated Inequity: An Introduction

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The word nontraditional according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (n.d.) is an adjective meaning "not following or confirming to tradition; not adhering to past practices or conventions; not traditional." The COVID-19 pandemic, overnight, thrust higher education into a state, as Lamberti (2022) says in this issue, of "flying the plane while building it" (p. 212). Every action taken by faculty during the pandemic could in some way be defined as nontraditional. The impacts of this nontraditional learning context astoundingly illuminated the inequitable conditions of learning and the unequal reactions to those conditions experienced by students. Some thrived in the online learning environment that overnight became normative (but in some ways always felt foreign). Those that thrived praised the ability to study on their own schedule and were grateful for the time regained that in normal times was reserved for commuting to and from campus. They loved the ability to live at home rather than relocate for their education. They shifted the money saved on gasoline and transportation to internet connection and other technologies. For others, remote learning was disastrous. In a world isolated from others, these students craved human contact and the spontaneity of in-person learning that happens in casual moments and in connection with their classmates and teachers. They lost their privacy as we peered by camera into the backgrounds of their homelife or had family members scrutinizing their every move as a student. Their bedrooms became their classrooms, their leisure space, and where they slept. Some found themselves trapped in their homes with abusive family members. Compartmentalizing their studies as a separate part of their identity from who they were at home was no longer possible.

Every reaction to the pandemic context was individualized and personal. As a student, the notion of being "nontraditional" implies the learner is *not* white, English first-language speaking, male, cis, economically stable, city dwelling, under the age of 25, or unencumbered by parenthood. The absence of these characteristics intersect with compounding effects on student experience. Since higher education has set its rules and norms based on students meeting these characteristics, the less a student fits into the traditional box, the greater the sense of difference and lack of belonging they may feel in our classrooms.

It has always seemed that, like the pandemic, writing as a pedagogy and professional requirement has always illuminated the individuality and diversity of our students as people and thinkers. The authors who participated in this special section tell us that the act of writing and the instruction of writing are influenced by our lens for viewing the world and our lens is betrayed by the models and theories of writing and learning we are drawn to when we teach. This forces us to face our own biases and acknowledge the ways we create unintended lessons or hidden curricula in our classes through tacit messages. We learn from these authors that nothing about our word choice, grammars, or discourses is standard. Individual diversities manifest as differences in language and literacies, encouraging us to rethink what we as faculty accept as good writing and how we guide students to embrace their individuality in that process. In many ways, writing instruction, as well as the act of writing itself, has always placed faculty and students in a state of "flying the plane while building it." There is no better academic activity than writing to dissect for what it can teach us about the inequities present in higher education within institutional, instructional, and learner realities.

This year's special issue topic, "Rethinking the Structures of Academic Writing in the Times of Exacerbated Inequity," addresses the socio-political present. We asked authors to examine the pragmatics of the teaching of academic writing in light of the inequities that the COVID-19 pandemic and the global movements for racial justice are visibly surfacing:

> Our call for papers solicits submissions which explore from critical perspectives how issues of inequity can be addressed in the instruction and practice of academic writing and discourse. Access to, and success in, academic discourse is often a challenge for students who enter higher education from positions of academic, social, or economic disadvantage. Often designated as "remedial," "at risk," or "non-traditional," such students may be learning English as an additional language, may be first-in-family university students, and/or may be marginalized by identities of race, gender, class, and age. We seek submissions that critically examine, and aim to reform, issues

of inequity in academic writing pedagogies, academic writing discourses, literacy practices, grading practices, or writing-related institutional policies, at the undergraduate or graduate level.

In addition to the COVID-19 context, the call was also inspired by the finding of one of our works (Mitchell, Baxter, et al., 2021) examining student retention in the nursing discipline where the terms "remedial," "at risk," and "non-traditional," used in the call, had been inventoried from 112 papers on the subject. As Dr. Mya Poe rightfully points out in her lead paper to this special section, the call fails to mention and assumes as obvious what happens to these students when they are admitted to higher education—they fail courses due to academic insufficiencies, often due to shortcomings in their abilities with literacy (especially reading and writing). These shortcomings are not due to personal failings but due to systemic structures that have failed to support or are due to being educated in context where belief systems emphasize different educational priorities than those normalized in Western education systems. They drop out due to low GPAs or a sense of othered-ness or lack of belonging in this Western centric environment of higher education in institutions governed by a white racial habitus (Inoue, 2015). Other work (Mitchell, McMillen, et al., 2021) has identified how rigid instructional practices and difficulties navigating the academic discourse found in rubrics and assignment guidelines disadvantage international students, BIPOC students, and students who are first in family to university. This context results in student behaviours that show they've diverted their focus away from the learning that a writing assignment is supposed to elicit, and toward a hyperfocus on their grades and figuring out the preferences and biases of each individual teacher – a context that white students, educationally experienced students, and privileged students usually savvily navigate.

The call was also inspired by attending numerous workshops and talks discussing Indigenizing or addressing antiracism in teaching and learning. All of these talks focused on "the problem" of antiracism and the realities of the students experiencing racist instructional environments; none of these talks provided actionable solutions to improving the lives of the students whom the speakers were passionate about recruiting and helping to be successful. It has felt as if the messaging inherent in conversations about inequity was that understanding and awareness of "the problem" was enough to bring change. We wished to inspire authors to address the praxis of equitable teaching practices while outlining how traditional practices were the instruments of that exacerbated inequity.

This special section begins with the invited paper by Dr. Mya Poe from Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts, USA entitled, "Learning to Unlearn: The Teaching and Assessment of Academic Writing." Poe's paper describes the events that define this moment beginning with the

COVID-19 pandemic context and how its rapid shift to online learning from kindergarten to graduate school illuminated inequities in the classroom. COVID-19 learning environments widened the gap between haves and have nots, between black, brown, and white students, between those with readily available academic and social supports outside the institution and those without. Drawing from decolonial theory, Poe describes how coloniality—defined as the patterns of power that structure all aspects of Western modes of education—underlies the creation, assessment, and circulation of knowledge, and the norms and criteria of student writing. As Young and Condon (2017) have said in their own book on antiracist pedagogies in rhetoric, writing, and communication, there is no end to antiracist work in one's life. To call out or be called out for transgressions is a part of learning to know one's self. The necessity of getting to know one's biases and unlearn the teachings of our past (and present) is what Poe refers to as learning to unlearn.

Our challenge as scholars is to move, as Poe and several of our contributing authors do, from observation and experience to interpretation, from seeing social ills to analyzing their causes and proposing interventions and alternatives. In the act of interpretation, it is easy to fall back on reflexively deploying one's preferred interpretive lens—what Kenneth Burke (1966) calls a "terministic screen" (p. 45). In so doing, what we "see" through our terminology clarifies for us the complexity we set out to analyze, and thus the interpretive lens validates itself.

The susceptibility toward such prefabricated conclusions is trans-ideological: it may be evangelist Jerry Falwell explaining every social ill as god's punishment of the wicked, or political journalist Naomi Klein explaining every social ill as a consequence of capitalism. To quote H. L. Mencken (1920), "there is always a well-known solution to every human problem—neat, plausible, and wrong" (p. 505). And to quote John Searle (1979), "Every subject matter has its catchphrases to enable us to stop thinking before we have got a solution to our problems" (p. 60).

The dialogue between authors and editors has encouraged us to question our interpretative commonplaces, in order to give issues of inequity the thoughtful discussions and interventions they deserve while acknowledging their complexities. We have also encouraged authors to critically examine the available means of persuasion themselves, the argumentative moves that distinguish academic discourse. In politically oriented writings in the humanities and social sciences, these moves are common enough to constitute a genre, who's conventional "genre moves" are more or less as follows:

1. There's this social problem or inequity.

2. The root of the problem is identified as a political or economic position not held by the author. (Historically, the source of the problem is identified as either the Enlightenment or Descartes.)
3. The actions that regular people, uninformed by current theories and vocabularies, want to take to ameliorate this problem are misguided or inadequate because they don't address the ideology that controls the system and the structure of society.
4. So, what actually needs to change is the entire system, so that it better reflects the political or economic position that is held by the author.
5. But as society is currently constituted, we can't really change much after all, because we're all implicated in the ideology we're criticizing.
6. As a result, the tangible actions ultimately proposed fail to live up to the paper's revolutionary fervor, and in fact tend not to be much different from the actions that people are already doing: in writing pedagogy, for example, giving students more choice of paper topics, or assigning more personal narratives or journaling. The proposed actions thus make the critical theory and terminology seem at best superfluous, and at worst ineffectual.

So, we invited the authors to consider this genre's shortcomings, to confront its assumptions, and to ask if the types of thinking its genre moves allow may be not a challenge to the contemporary university but rather one of the routine practices and modes of discourse that make the university—and keep it—what it is. The essays in this special section, written by an international panel of authors, thus address social inequity, and also address the way we tend to address social inequity. Our responding authors addressed our challenge admirably.

Dale Tracy from Kwantlen Polytechnic University in British Columbia calls upon writing scholars to use critical writing studies both to disrupt the models of writing we currently use, and reciprocally to examine how the disruption of those models can contribute to the conversations about critical writing studies. Students' enactment of writing models should not merely mimic those models but rather recreate them. Thus, when we evaluate students by searching for ways in which they failed to imitate our personally desired model of writing, we are evaluating them from a deficit perspective. Tracy describes Brucie, a statue residing on the grounds of the Royal Military College in Kingston, Ontario, to represent the model cadet (male, white, impeccably dressed, standing perfectly and immovably erect) to be admired and imitated by all, as a metaphor for the student as the perfect writer and model student. Both Brucie as the perfect cadet and our visions of the ideal student writer are models that need disrupting. Tracy concludes with the exemplar of the book recommendation that also requires reciprocity as a practice of good reading.

In the wake of COVID-19, **Adrienne Lamberti** (University of Northern Iowa), as an example of disrupting models of teaching practices, critiques with honesty and humility her own commitment to the "distributed knowledge" framework and its potential for writing program administration and writing instruction. "Pandemic surprises" led Lamberti to a revision of an interpretive lens which privileges expertise in favor of a "post-pandemic frame" which better addresses the plurality of students and the complexity of individuals.

In "Doctoral Students' Collaborative Practices in Developing Writer Identities," **Carla Tapia and Nicola Stewart** (Griffith University, Australia) draw on Lave and Wenger's description of "communities of practice" to outline their collaborative efforts as doctoral students to develop academic writing skills and writer identities. Using an auto-ethnographic approach, they describe how a peer-led community of practice overcame the deficiencies in supervisor and university support, in a collaboration which evolved and deepened to respond to their shifting needs and their developing academic identities.

Cecile Badenhorst, Abu Arif, and Kelvin Quintyne (Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador) also employ auto-ethnography in their analysis of the ways that academic citation practices naturalize exclusion and discrimination. The authors write that "citation practices can cement existing norms but, of course, they can also be used to resist entrenched hierarchies of knowledge production." Writing with a narrative approach, which itself resists the conventional "genre moves" of the academic paper, the authors—all current or former international students—guide us toward imagining a citational practice that resists "naturalizing grammar" and prioritizes inclusivity.

Katja Thieme from the University of British Columbia expands on the traditional definition of grammar through the concept of "spacious grammar." Thieme examines how rhetorical structures of language in the genre of research writing can be taught as spacious grammar, or "a code that provides a range of options for producing performative effects," to steer the instructor away from prescriptive rules of correcting student use of language and grammar. The paper focuses on three pragmatic features of research writing: positionality, citation, and evaluation.

Kristen H. Starkowski, from Harvard College, revisits the concept of "the hidden curriculum," understood here as the norms, values, and practices that are too often unknown and inaccessible to students not already familiar with academic expectations, discourses, and identities. Starkowski gives pragmatic recommendations for inviting students into the academic conversation by making its practices explicit, with guidance that is relevant in and beyond the first-year writing classroom.

Erin DiCesare and Shawn Miklaucic from Johnson C. Smith University, an Historically Black College and University (HBCU) in Charlotte, North Carolina, examine their institutional practices of the senior investigative paper. In particular they aim to understand students' "grappling with and resistances to standard Academic English" and their own instructional journey to rethink and unlearn "what counts as 'proper' academic writing."

Craig Stensrud and Moberley Luger of the University of British Columbia examine the discourse of the presentation as scholarly speaking. They begin by examining how advice on giving a good presentation inevitably revolves around descriptions of Western appropriateness of dress and speech. This Western perspective privileges "certain speakers" and "[perpetuates] discrimination based on gender, race, sexuality, language, ability, and/or culture." These authors focus on a communication paradigm rather than a performance paradigm, in order to steer evaluators, especially white evaluators, away from "White habits of judgement" (Inoue, 2019). They strive to connect speaking and writing and position speaking in the research process to ensure the extent to which the audience understands the message is privileged over performance.

We encourage the readers of this special issue to examine genre presentation, as described above, when reading any literature written from a critical perspective exploring the impact of inequity related to race, gender, social class, age, and other categories of difference. We ask writing scholars, whether in the role of author or reviewer, to call for clear descriptions of pragmatic responses to systemic or instructional contributors to inequities. We invite the readers of this special issue to submit future reflective articles, research studies, and analyses inspired by the topic and writings contained within this special issue, and we hope *Discourse and Writing/Rédactologie* can play a role in expanding on this conversation.

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