

Academic Writing: A Higher Education Threshold^{*}

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Reflecting on the changing nature of written language and on its centrality in the academic world, and conscious of the many writing support mechanisms and interventions that can be found in the contemporary world of higher education, we considered that it was timely to offer colleagues an opportunity to reflect more systematically on the area of academic writing and share their knowledge and experience with the readership of the journal. In considering best method to address this, we thought it important to consider the rationale for reflecting on one specific theme, and this theme in particular. This led us to articulate certain beliefs about writing and its place in higher education. In introducing this thematic issue, we have decided to share these beliefs.

The motivation for the issue is founded on five beliefs we, as editors, hold about writing and we hope that its publication will add the AISHE–J voice, and the voice of our individual contributors to the global conversation on writing. Firstly, we believe at a very practical level that a significant outcome of higher education should be that one is a capable, competent written and oral communicator. This is a threshold that the student crosses in the course of his or her studies. Secondly, we believe that attention to writing and writing processes can help us, and our students, to learn. Our position echoes Emig's ideas in '*Writing as a Mode of*

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Learning' (1977) when she declares that "Writing represents a unique mode of learning -not merely valuable, not merely special, but unique". Likewise, it concurs with Bean's proposal that 'integrating writing and other critical thinking activities into a course increases students' learning while teaching them thinking skills for posing questions, proposing hypotheses, gathering and analyzing data, and making arguments.' (Bean, 2001,1). Where writing is approached as meaning-making, it is central to the students' learning journeys. As learning journeys continue for teachers and researchers in higher education, we encompass in the issue the related themes of student academic writing and the development of writing for academic colleagues.

Thirdly, we believe that writing, in the context of literacy, is a political issue. As Brandt notes, 'Expanding literacy undeniably has been an instrument for more democratic access to learning, political participation, and upward mobility. At the same time, it has become one of the sharpest tolls for stratification and denial of opportunity.... [It] is a grounds for potential exploitation, injustice, and struggle as well as potential hope, satisfaction, and reward.' (Brandt, 2001, 2-3). As members of the higher education community, the creation of the good society for all citizens should be central to our goals. In fostering writing we can contribute to ensuring that society is characterized by thresholds that can be crossed rather than barriers to hold people back. Voicing our opinions, speaking and writing for the silenced, and helping others to articulate their lived experience and situation is both a privilege and, as educators and learners, a responsibility.

We believe, and this is our fourth in terms only of its order in the list, and not significance, in the joy of writing and the pleasure one can experience in the elegance of the written word. We believe that engagement with the written word, reading it, writing it, speaking it and listening to it can be an intense, splendid, deep and sublime experience.

Finally, we believe that writing as a concern and a key factor in learning and communication is part of our future and our way forward. As Andrews and Smith note, 'There is no sense, from our point of view, that writing is going to fade in significance, even though other modes may come into sharper focus or prominence. Rather, we see writing as taking its place as a flexible, power mode of communication alongside other modes – made more powerful by interaction alongside those other modes than less so.' (187).

The dialogue around writing in higher education in Ireland, in Europe, in the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Scandinavia, one might almost say globally, is vibrant and growing. The interdisciplinary nature of these conversations offers opportunities for writers from all backgrounds to engage and collaborate with a common urge to compose and to share. Nurturing these conversations is a responsibility to which AISHE-J, as a journal for those interested in advancing higher education, is pleased to contribute. Therefore, we issued an invitation through the journal list and through a number of networks working in the area of academic writing, both in Ireland and further afield, asking for relevant papers. We decided to take a broad view of the topic, including work on supporting academics in writing for publication on the one hand, and work in relation to supporting students in their development as academic writers. The result is the issue that we now bring to you.

References

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