The University as a Workplace: New Directions in the Study of Academic Writing

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Academic writing

- Much work in academic writing analyzes aspects of the language, genre and structure, in relation to discipline and discourse community
  - Eg Hyland (2012), Swales (2004), Myers (1990)
- And / or focuses predominantly on apprentices (students) learning academic writing
  - Eg Ivanic (1997), Murray (2015)

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Academic writing as workplace practice

- We approach academic writing as a workplace practice – what do professional academics *do* in academic writing work?
  - Following eg Lillis and Curry (2010), Lea and Stierer (2009, 2011)
- What are the writing practices people engage in to create and communicate knowledge?
  - Many different kinds of writing > Interested in all types of writing, not just scholarly
  - Carried out in <u>particular working conditions</u> > How changing context and conditions of academic workplace in the UK are shaping processes of knowledge creation

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Transformations in the Higher Education workplace in the UK

- Changing <u>spaces of work </u>(Temple and Barnett 2007), from personal offices to corporate spaces

- Transformations in <u>tools and resources, particularly digital </u>(Goodfellow and Lea 2013)
  - Facilitating distance and blended learning and collaboration (Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs), video conferencing, online library resources, …)
  - Social networking; public online persona required
  - Smartphones and portable devices

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Research design

- Adopting a social practice approach to literacy and a sociomaterial perspective

- To understand academics' writing practices in detail, conceived of as literacy practices (Barton 2007)
  - In their current context, institution, discipline
  - In their life history
  - Attending to their experiences and perspectives
  - Analysing the materiality of tools and resources

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Issues in workplace research (Rock 2015)

- Access and consent
- Busy work schedules, imposition and distraction in work time
- Direct challenge to participants' professional selves
- Potential negative impact on institution
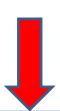- Concerns about confidentiality and anonymity

Sites

- To enable comparison across disciplines and across types of university

	Maths	Marketing	History
University A: research-intensive, non-Russell group	UniA-Maths	UniA-Marketing	UniA-History
University B: Russell group	UniB-Maths	UniB-Marketing	UniB-History
University C: post-1992 university	UniC-Maths	UniC-Marketing	UniC-History

- Plus pilot work in our own disciplines, and auto-ethnographic work

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We are here

Phase 1: working with individuals
- Interviews with individuals about their work practices, technobiographies, and typical days' practices

Phase 2: detailed study of writing processes
- Recording the detail of writing processes using screen capture, digital pens, keyboard tracking, informed by interviews

Phase 3: understanding the community
- Interviews with managers, administrative staff, colleagues and collaborators

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Things you learn about when you pay attention to academia as a workplace

- 1. Times and spaces of academic work
  - Strategies for defining and bounding work space
- 2. Changing resources, particularly how digital communicative resources are enabling different practices
  - Enabling engagement with other people and networks
  - But bringing their own challenges, particularly email

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1. Times and spaces of work

Office space used to organize writing

- Diane: Yes. Usually if I'm writing, this is what happens, piles. This actually is something I'm working on right now. I'm very much out of sight, out of mind. [...] This is writing jobs. <u>Different papers have different envelopes</u>. There's a bit of teaching stuff there that hasn't made it into the filing cabinet. Usually when I've finished it, so <u>that's a teaching pile, that's a writing pile</u>, I've usually got about eight papers on the go at the same time in different states, from conference paper to finally got rid of.

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But often: separation out of 'serious' work, not done in the office

Don, History: I wouldn't do any writing on campus. […] <u>Any serious writing for research, I would basically do at home</u> in my study. The writing, which has more to do with administration, I would tend to do in the office.   Longer documents and emails, I guess I would either write in the office or at home.

Strong feelings about working on campus

Rebecca, History: I would say that of all the places that I would use for writing anywhere in the university is a long way down the list. That's <u>only in extremis</u> would I write within the university, on the campus, and the bottom of the places that I would use on campus is my office.

1. Times and spaces of work

- \> A workplace in which many people work in places other than that provided for them
- Most participants say their office is not where they do 'serious' writing work – why?

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Extending time and space of work by working at home

Charles, Marketing: I get up very early in the morning. I get up at six and I read an hour and I go to bed late, so I do maybe half an hour, an hour most nights, but it's more just for me so I feel I'm on top of things. I feel like I achieve that.

Interruptions

Rebecca: It's really unconducive to writing. It's really unconducive to working, full stop.[…] Not because the space itself is not conducive, but the fact that it's a workspace. It's **not conducive to work**, because if you're in your office then you're available for your colleagues to call in, for your students to come and… Even if you have designated office hours, and so on, if you're in then you're available for whatever it is, if someone knocks at your door. It's difficult to get periods of time, even very short ones, in which you can compose something, so I would try and do everything at home.

Sensory demands of 'serious' work

Diane, Marketing: I do a lot of my intellectual writing at home. I do the other work here, but the intellectual writing I do at home because these walls are like paper. <u>You hear through the wall. If you're holding a thought and trying to work out something, you can lose it completely.</u>

Writing in public spaces

Diane, Marketing: <u>There's places actually with a lot of people that you can work really well.</u> I always work quite well, so long as I'm not travel sick, on a train. If I've got to write, I can block sound out and write. If there's a bit of sound, it's distracting. I've done some of my best writing when Hamish was at a swimming lesson, and there's all the swimming pool noise.

Retreating

Diane:. I have taken up those wooden balls in the woods [...] I've done that a few times and it has been really productive. In a busy day, it means thinking ahead instead of grabbing an hour to write. [...]

Sharon: What's in there?

Diane: Nothing. They're not very good for internet access. If you want to do yourself <u>a sort of disciplined writing retreat</u> without going away from home and still being in time for tea, you can take that out for two or three hours or for a day and there is literally a table, somewhere to sit in there and a heater. That's it.

Photo by Clem Rutter (www.clemrutter.net), used under Creative Commons BY-SA 3.0

Working in other spaces is enabled and constrained by digital resources

Ian: If I'm at home and I think, "Oh, I'll just check my email before I go in, to see if there is anything I need to take, or need to do", I switch the laptop on, it takes ages. So this [Blackberry] is dead easy to flip it open, and your timetable and stuff are all on there.

But this also makes retreating hard

Sharon: So do you try to separate life and work in that sense?

Charles : It's hard. The iPhone makes it hard. […] I find myself constantly on the bloody thing.

Sharon: Checking emails and things like that?

Charles: Yes. I don't like myself doing it. What was that track? Infofreak. I feel like I'm an infofreak. I walk past it to the kettle, click it. Walk past it here, click it. It's just like that[…] The last thing I do at night is check my emails. The first thing I do in the morning is check my emails.

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1. Times and spaces of work

- > A workplace in which many people work in places other than those provided for them
- Most participants say their office is not where they do 'serious' writing work
  - Escape from interruptions
  - Sensory demands
- Strategies to address these challenges
  - Placing boundaries around other times and spaces
  - Supported by digital resources – but these bring challenges

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2. Digital resources provide both possibilities and constraints

Huge range of digital platforms

- Many digital platforms referenced so far :
  - Writing: Word processing, LaTeX, reference management software
  - Filesharing
  - Research: CAQDAS software, spreadsheets
  - Electronic submissions systems
  - Institutional: repository, student records system, VLE
  - Social networking: Facebook, Twitter
  - Video conferencing
  - ….
- Some chosen, some encouraged (Twitter), some imposed (VLE, institutional repository)

Collaborations facilitated by multiple digital tools

Ian: Skyping would be to discuss generally issues around the research and ideas that have developed […] Then the writing you would have a most up to date LaTeX file.. […] Sometimes we miss the fact that somebody else is already making changes. So we tried using *Subversion*. I don't know if you've heard of this. It's a way of sharing documents. You have to send a message to some server to get the most up to date version.

[*and also uses Dropbox and Google Drive at later stages.*]

A great deal of the time academics spend writing is 'doing emails'

- Email both a great tool and a great challenge
  - Volume
  - Multiple kinds of emails, dealt with in different ways
  - Range of email strategies

Tasks and commitments embedded in email

Ian, Maths: I mean, I started, as usual, around about 8:30, checking my emails at home and then realising, "Oh yes, <u>I've got that to do</u>, and this thing to do." [...] <u>Tidying up</u> a lot of the stuff that might have hung over from a previous day, or from before the weekend, <u>making sure that all of the quick and easy jobs are actually done</u> and I've cleaned away my unnecessary emails, or ones that I've dealt with, that I can file them away.

Combination of quick tasks and demanding ones

Ian, Maths: <u>Usually they're dead easy</u>, it's a sort of one paragraph response, if it's related to teaching, if a student asks me some practical detail [...] <u>If an email requires some thought on my part, unfortunately that means it's going to get left</u>, because you really need to sit and... If you've got a lot of things that you need to do, then that's something that just gets left.

Disjunctures between individuals' email practices

Ian: It's no longer in bold. I said this to my head of section who emails at 5pm, every time, who will come and knock on the door at 4:55 or something, and he'll email late in the afternoon. Now, the result of that is I read the email, but if it requires any kind of thought at all, I'm not going to answer it that evening, so then I'll come back the next day and it's not a new email. He's always complaining to me, it's like, "Well, send me something at 10:00 in the morning, and then I'll actually answer you."

Email is challenging – but email isn't seen as the work in itself, either

Ian: Well, again, <u>knocked off a few emails </u>when I got back to the office, ate my lunch and <u>started</u>...

Diane:	It's like every time you sat down to do some writing, an email comes in that takes you away from it.

Emotional challenges can lurk in email

Charles, Marketing: The reviews were obtuse, to that point of I got a bit of a word from the very nice lady next door because I was like, "Oooo." mad. I just got this email. I'm looking at it and I saw the email was there from the editor. I was thinking, "I don't want to open this. I know what it is. It says "Corresponding author". So I clicked in and I was like, "Fwaaaa." I'm sure we've all been there. You do take it very personally. […] It's like, "Oh somebody's telling me I'm a bit dense." Bugger that Monday morning nine o'clock.

2. Digital resources for writing provide both possibilities and constraints

- Huge range of different digital resources, often used together

- Facilitate collaboration and extension of workplace in space and time

- Email by far the most commonly mentioned, but brings its own range of difficulties
  - Many different kinds of tasks in emails
  - People's email practices don't always mesh neatly
  - Can elicit difficult affective responses

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Conclusions: What, actually, is writing in an academic workplace?

- Distinctive kind of workplace in which to research writing

- Writing practices take place in multiple spaces

- Digital resources both facilitate and constrain these strategies, for collaborative and for individual writing

- Different kinds of writing are valued differently

- People use a range of strategies to carve out time and space for their most highly-valued work

- Email causes enormous challenges – and yet is often not interpreted as 'the work' in itself

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Further explorations

- Phase 2, detailed observations of writing practices, will begin in the autumn
- To follow the project's progress:
  - http://wp.lancs.ac.uk/acadswriting/

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