Defining "Good" Writing: Attitudes and Ideology in Anglophone Canadian University Language Policy

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"WHAT MAKES GOOD WRITING IS HARD TO DESCRIBE..."

"...I JUST KNOW IT WHEN I SEE IT."

WHAT MAKES "GOOD" WRITING?

QUESTIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

- What language ideologies/discourses shape the policies and practices around academic writing instruction and assessment at our institutions?
- How can we most effectively mark and deliver feedback on writing in linguistically-diverse Anglophone universities?
- How can we be fair and equitable in our approaches to academic writing instruction in contexts of linguistic diversity?

LANGUAGE POLICY IN HIGHER ED

WHAT IS LANGUAGE POLICY?

... a mechanism that impacts the structure, function, use or acquisition of language and includes official and unofficial, overt and covert, implicit and explicit mechanisms, products and processes. (Johnson, 2013)

LANGUAGE IS "INVISIBLE"

Much language policy at Anglophone Canadian universities is covert, implicit and de facto. (MacDonald, 2020)

EVERYONE'S A POLICY-MAKER

In this dispersed policy environment, a wide variety of stakeholders across the university are involved in language policy-making.

POLICY IS PEDAGOGY

Policy influences what we teach and how we teach it

DISCURSIVE APPROACH TO POLICY

Discourses are social practices—ways of orienting oneself to the world—and include not just words but actions and behaviours (Foucault, 1972)

POLICY AS DISCOURSE

Ball (1999): Policy is "not […a] response to existing conditions and problems, but […a] discourse in which both problems and solutions are created".

Examples of Language Policy Focused on Writing
(MacDonald, 2020)

✓ **COURSE AND PROGRAM REQUIREMENTS**

✓ **CURRICULA AND COURSE CONTENT**

✓ **CORRECTION CODES, KEYS**

✓ **POST-ENROLLMENT LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT**

WRITTENNESS
(TURNER, 2018)

UNQUESTIONED IDEAS

Historically influenced aesthetic and stylistic norms and values of writing in the academy. Taken for granted, unproblematized

EXPOSITORY IDEOLOGY

Roots in European Enlightenment; conceptualizes writing as a "neutral or transparent" conduit for knowledge: "plainness, directness, precision and concision"

SMOOTH RIDE IDEOLOGY

- Conceptualizes the reading of text using metaphors of movement.
- Reading an academic text "ideally should be unencumbered and therefore smooth".
- Onus is on the writer to create this smooth ride via the elements of clarity, concision and accuracy in their writing.

WRITTENNESS
(TURNER, 2018)

LINGUISTIC CONFLATION IDEOLOGY

"Problems with linguistic accuracy, as well as style, are seen to index intellectual deficit" . Failure to acknowledge the intellectual labour of writing: "The ideas are fine, just 'fix' the English."

FRICTIONS

Language that does not provide a smooth ride becomes marked; it ceases to be an invisible conduit of ideas and therefore becomes seen as a problem by gate-keepers in the academy

## SHIFTING LANDSCAPE OF LANGUAGE USE

- International contexts
- Shifting of responsibility to the reader
- Relaxing reader expectations allows for more "bumpy" texts, and a "more flexible approach to the uptake of writtenness"

GOOD WRITING POLICY

CASE STUDY

- Anglophone Canadian research/medical-doctoral university

- Significant (~20%) population of international students

- Good Writing policy in the undergraduate academic calendar; in the Academic Regulations section

- Critical analysis of "discourse-in-place" (Scollon & Scollon (2004, p. 10) drawing on Gee (2005) and Fairclough (2015)

WRITTNNESS IN THIS POLICY
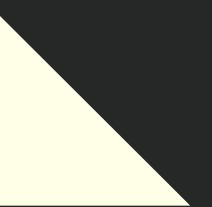
ACADEMIC WRITING AS GENERIC SKILL

One definition of "good" writing for all contexts and disciplines.

SMOOTH RIDE IDEOLOGY

Clarity, organization, purity, accuracy emphasized throughout

LINGUISTIC CONFLATION IDEOLOGY

Part 1: A student can be failed for not showing "good" writing, even if they have mastered the subject matter of the course.

SO WHAT? WHAT'S THE PROBLEM WITH WRITTENNESS?

IT'S A TAKEN-FOR-GRANTED ASSUMPTION WHICH MARGINALIZES MANY USERS OF ENGLISH

Monolingual Ideologies, Multilingual Institutions

Linguistic Diversity in our institutions

Native Speaker as Default Student

"Invisibility" of linguistic cultural context of English

Liddicoat and Crichton (2008)

Native-speakerism by those in power and authority in the academy

How can practitioners "destabilize" unspoken assumptions?

✓ MAKE THE INVISIBLE VISBLE IN OUR PRACTICE
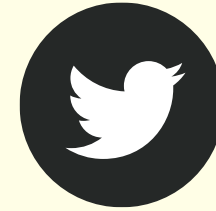
✓ TEACH WRITING AS A SKILL, NOT AN ART.

✓ PLURAL AND INCLUSIVE DEFINITION OF "GOOD" WRITING

✓ LEARN AND TEACH ACCEPTANCE OF A "BUMPY RIDE"

QUESTIONS?

DO YOU HAVE EXAMPLES OF "WRITTENNESS" IN ACTION?

THANK YOU!

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