

# INTERDEPENDENT ACADEMIC IDENTITIES: LANGUAGE AND LEARNING PRACTITIONERS AND THE SUBJECT WHO WRITES.

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Starting with questions of how a language and learning practitioner might assist a student to write in ways demanded of them by a university, we argue that writing pedagogies at an undergraduate and postgraduate level must take account of and work with the complex of informing and transforming conditions of student identity and subjectivity. The identities-in-practice of language and learning practitioners have an interdependent relation to the identities-in-practice of the students with whom they work. In exploring this interdependence and its implications for writing pedagogy, we draw a distinction between the writing subject (a self that writes like an academic) and the subject who writes (an idea of self which

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exceeds the notion of the writing subject through a recognition of the subject's embodied, affective and gendered history). We argue that consideration of the pedagogical interdependence needs to be seen through the experience of students as more than simply writing subjects. To do this, we work with an idea of the subject who writes. A crucial question in our consideration is, are new and developing subjectivities, as produced in and through the university context seamless and replicable or do they embody and challenge traces of the emotional, cognitive and experiential history of the individuals learning to be academics? We take an approach which allows us to explore the ways in which institutions attempt to 'discipline' students into their disciplines and we make the claim that this experience of being 'disciplined' is one which (for the subject who writes) exceeds linguistic, cognitive and textual competence.


**Keywords:** *Writing pedagogy, The subject who writes, Ontology of becoming*

## INTRODUCTION

There is a debate occurring in Australian universities at present about how best to ensure that students gain access to instruction in the tertiary literacies that are often conflated with "Graduate Attributes". The imperative that both fuels and is produced by this debate is one concerned with the production of particular kinds of social subjects and the implementation of writing pedagogies (among other pedagogies) that will facilitate such a production.

In this paper, we take the notion of academic identities or subjectivities which seems to be a fairly unexamined "given" by those involved in the debate and we subject to closer scrutiny the conceptualising of academic identity joined to particular expectations of undergraduate and postgraduate writing practices. Such an exploration questions the straightforwardness or the neatness of the subjectivities that are implied by the categories and assumptions of such things as graduate attributes.

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We argue that students bring with them to their production of texts (visual, written, spoken and bodily) in the university particular emotional, cognitive, and experiential histories. It is these histories which inform our use of the term “subjectivity”. We use the term “subjectivity” to imply a self that is not only entangled with a social and cultural history, but one that is also mediated and made possible through discourse. We want to face this complexity of history and disposition and its impact on educational trajectories. We hope that our considerations of the practice of writing and the process of learning to write, seen as a process of discursive, subjective negotiation, will inform the debate at a level that is concerned with:


- who students are as social and educational subjects, and
- where current Learning Development or Learning Centre practices and philosophies sit in the context of this more elaborated and complex consideration of academic identity.

Our exploration is based on the hypothesis that writing is not just a cognitive or linguistic skill but is part of a more complex, elaborate and uncertain gendered, affective, and psychic process of becoming. It is this hypothesis and its framing within the work of authors more often associated with areas of philosophy, cultural, political and gender studies (Grosz, 1999; Butler, 1997; Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) which we hope allows us to contribute to the dialogue with other writers who, like us, are interested in exploring “...issues concerning the institutional and cultural possibilities for, and constraints on self hood [that]are thrown into sharp relief by considering what happens when a person is actually engaged in an act of self representation (Ivanic, 1998, p.20).

## **Theoretical and Conceptual Issues**

A corollary of our attempt to step outside the usual considerations taken in the Australian debate about tertiary literacies is that we challenge both the genre approach to writing pedagogy, on the one hand, and the process approach on the other. The extremes of this debate form an arbitrary division between the technical

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necessities of writing and the individualised experience of becoming a writer. By resisting these extremes, we are suggesting, by analysis, that writing for the academy involves both, and much more, in between and beyond the genre/process distinction. Our resistance here is founded on a broader resistance to any sense of fixable, finalising ideas about human subjectivity, and to romantic liberal ideas of the uniqueness of the human.

Both sides of this particular debate [about subjectivity], those who want to pin the subject down definitively, and those who resist ...— rest on the same mode of subjectivity. For those who believe that we will one day have a unique model of the self, subjectivity must be a consistent and quantifiable entity, a stable thing whose limits we can know and whose structure we can map. For those who believe the opposite, subjectivity is also a thing, but an ineffable one, producing intensities, emotions and values that are so beautiful or unique that they bear witness to an ultimate, irreplaceable and inexplicable individuality that is dazzling yet self contained, like a precious jewel (Mansfield, 2000, p.6).

We want to make our challenge in our analysis by introducing the notions of excess (Grosz, 1999) and flight (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) in order to re-examine our assumptions about what writing pedagogy might involve, by thinking more about what the writing process is for those who write. What these two ideas – excess and flight – allow us to consider is the process of ‘territorial’ negotiation. If territory is that which is marked and formed by certain discourses (the academic, the personal etc.) then flight implies movement in and between such territories, and the overstepping and negotiating of boundaries. By excess is meant the way in which the lived experience of a student exceeds that which is known or can be known by academic educational discursive practice. This includes, for us, the complexities of emotional and embodied experiences which are beyond the known territory of writing processes and disciplinary knowledges and the products and artefacts (texts and other demonstrations of competence) of ‘academic’ territory. Flight, given a focus on

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lived and complex experience, is used to describe the way in which a student moves across and between territories, academic and other.

In our orientation, we want to apprehend and appreciate “the surprise of the new... the inherent capacity for time to link, in extraordinarily complex ways the past and present to a future that is uncontained by them and has the capacity to rewrite and transform them” (Grosz, 1999, p.7). Grosz, in her exploration of the temporal unfolding of experience as elaborating and contingent, sees time as “the process of production and creation in terms of openness to the new instead of preformism of the expected [that is, the reproduction of the given and ‘permitted’ forms of self via self representation/performance]” (1999, p.29).

We want to take this idea of elaborating (rather than foreclosing) temporal realisation, in systemic terms, “semogenesis/instantiation” (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2000) to the process and practice of writing, and writing pedagogy. We are looking toward an “ontology of being replaced by ontology of becoming” (Grosz, 1999, p.7) and are keenly interested in how such a perspective enables us to consider and appreciate the process of becoming an academic writer, and how this appreciation might inform writing pedagogy.

We attempt to see the experience of learning to write as unfolding along “lines of flight along which the assemblage [one’s habitus, disposition, subjectivity] breaks down or becomes transformed into something else.” (Paton, 2000, p.44). If every assemblage of self has both movements of reterritorialisation [a remarking of what is known and how it is known] which tend to fix and stabilise its elements and “cutting edges of deterritorialisation [which destabilise the ‘knowings’] which carry it away” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p.88, cited in Patton, 2000, p.44), then how does a self in the educational environment of a university, experience this movement, and how do they negotiate the territorialisation/ reterritorialisations, which fix and carry away, as they learn to write?

To consider more fully the experience of writing, of becoming a writer, and to appreciate the complexities of who a student might be in this process and how writing figures in their experience, we will contrast an idea of the writing subject with an idea of the subject who writes.

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## CASE STUDY

The writer we are focused on in our case study is A, a visual artist and mature age student, completing the thesis component of a Masters Honours degree in visual Arts. Under-lying A's motivation for academic study and her art practice, was a desire to, in the first instance, visually communicate an experience which has had and will continue to have a profound impact on her life.

In our exploration of A's writing, we want to actively resist and avoid resolution, neat solutions or closure. At the same time, we want to face the 'threat' of resolution, a threat that remains and is powerful (as goal — the final written product, judge — the assessment process/grade, requirement — completion/incompletion, appropriate 'disciplinarity') in most academic writing processes. This 'threat' is often projected as one of finishing, of completion, or having 'done' it, and, as a result, of 'being' something, or somewhere. This threat, present, articulate and reflexively determining of who a student might be, propels a set of desires (the student's and other's) in the domain of the academy.

In order to explore the process of becoming and its relationship to writing, taking seriously methodologically and pedagogically the complex subjective experience of the subject who writes, we take "moments" in the becoming of one academic subject and her experiences of writing. By taking moments rather than an individual or their 'texts' as focus in our analysis, we are methodologically resisting the ways in which ideas of writing subjects foreclose around that which is knowable and in view in the process of writing. There are several voices involved in the negotiation of this story and therefore an intermingling of narratives. A, the student; P, the supervisor; B, the Learning Assistance, writing teacher; and E, the examiner of the piece of writing ultimately produced by A.

Organising the material for the purpose of this paper has forced us to produce something tangible and coherent, negotiating some sort of order to produce an account of something that we would like to keep contingent, unfolding and indeterminate. This ordering is OUR order. We have struggled to do this and to still be able "to avoid the threat of resolution that narrative has" (Schlunke, 1999, p.8).

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We have chosen excess; “narratives of narratives and narrator and narrative co-mingling so that there is no single home for the writing self” (Schlunke, 1999, p.8).

Our ordering in this paper recognises that a key concern for language and learning practitioners is with working with students to develop their control of argument, cohesion and grammatical metaphor. We have taken grammatical metaphor as one point of departure for organising this paper.

### ***Grammatical Metaphor***

Grammatical metaphor has two key functions in relation to the Humanities disciplines within the university. Typically grammatical metaphor is used by the "skilled" Humanities writing subject for both abstraction and textual organisation. The skilled writing subject within the Humanities will usually organise their text through the use of theme and new, producing a periodicity which generates abstraction and obscures reason (Martin, 1993). Reasoning will often be buried within clauses, assumed as extant entities or processes in experiential clause grammar, rather than explicitly foregrounded between clauses with conjunctions such as "because". Grammatical metaphor allows multiple readings of a text. What we will show is that for A, grammatical metaphor did two things; it allowed for a bridge into academic writing mode and, it allowed for a particular relationship to her experience.


## **MOMENTS**

In this section, we explore the moments we have drawn from A's writing. Each of these moments involves an intermingling of A's drafts with P's comments on A's drafts, B's comments on A's drafts, A's responses to those comments and relevant excerpts from an interview with A. At times, we make a commentary on aspects of the moments.

### ***Moment 1: Draft 19***

*P's comments:* "Writing is not a rapturous activity. A, when it comes to thesis writing you must resist being carried on a poetic swirl, only noting the emotive and eschewing arguments. You can however, run riot in your exegesis”.

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*Commentary:* We have chosen to begin with P's comments concerning the rapturousness of A's writing because this seems to us to be a key concern in our exploration of the notions of excess and flight and their connection to the development of a writing pedagogy which replaces an ontology of being with an ontology of becoming.

*A's writing in this section of draft 19:*

It is as if a gentle wind has blown over the painting Monk by the sea and like the footprints obliterated all conventional landscape motifs even suspending light itself. The Sublime feeling is created by the threat of nothing happening but if something does we are relieved and delighted. It could be that this something is one of great simplicity, that goes unnoticed and unseen like the tiny cry of the wave on the dark ocean.

*B's annotations to A's draft:* minor tense change suggestions


*Commentary:* B's annotations were minor amendments to sentence level features of the text. They did not pick up the shift in tenor which P later describes as "poetic swirl" in his later reading of the draft. While B was aware of the duality that students in the Visual Arts experience, positioned as they are as both performer/artist and theoretician, B only later became aware that something other than confusion about tenor was operating. A felt her experience to be dominant / primary.

*A's Interview (the primacy of the experience)*

"There aren't words to write the experience...I realised that very soon after the experience when I was in a rapturous state and tried to describe it all to my family and there just weren't the words to describe it you know...so none of the traditional language that we have that communicates ideas and concepts to other people can be used. So that's why I have chosen painting rather than any other form of art, not installation, not anything else and I didn't choose to be an art



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theorist because it [the representation of the experience] only ever comes out once I start working and sometimes it might be the next day before I realise what I have done. ...I think this has been the problem with the writing. I was making all the connections and I couldn't believe that it wasn't obvious because for me it was more than obvious". (Interview with A, April, 2001)

**Moment 2: Draft 19** (begins with a quote)

In experiencing a work of art, one is brought to the limits of self and made to look beyond. Central to this phenomenology was the state of contemplation, of disengagement from the active instrumental self and, in experiencing the sublimities of a work of art, the self was momentarily abandoned and communication with the transcendent achieved ( Morley, 1999, p.28).

The next line in A's thesis is:

The theory of the sublime has an historical position in eighteenth -century literature, philosophy and the arts, meaning different things to different people.


*P's comment:* "I don't see the connection".

*Commentary:* For A, the connection between the quote from Morley and the theory of the sublime is obvious - the quote is about HER experience. The theory of the sublime is one way of communicating this experience.

*A's Interview:*

"I think I used the theory of the Sublime [to cloak my experience]. [I] felt very, very happy with the connection between the two- both Emmanuel Kant and Lyotard. I thought, yes, I can do what I want and now I've got the language that I need to back up what I want to do and then

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when I went to work with Emmanuel Kant ... when I started investigating the artists that were working with having the knowledge of Emmanuel Kant, I came across Caspar David Friedrich...so that's how it actually fell into place for me ...When I first read that [theory] I felt that what I had come to uni to do sat comfortably within that theory, then when I looked at the paintings that reflected the sublime they moved me greatly, that's Caspar David Friedrich's Monk by the sea just took me to the limits again-the limits of my existence...".(Interview with A, April, 2001)

*A's subsequent annotations on this same section of the draft:*

As Morley is a contemporary writer I have relocated to page 32 (this is chapter 6 titled Adaption of the Sublime in Contemporary Art) in the next draft.

*A's Interview:*

"... I think what I am trying to do is to take off all the layers like an onion- take off all these layers until... I find the purest line or the purest painting within myself...and I'm not sure I'm going to be satisfied with either". (Interview with A, April, 2001)

*Commentary:* The way A deals with P's comments is to shift the quote. In so doing, A is moving from the experience of becoming to an academic rendering of that experience as static. A's academic rendering of her experience involves her taxonomising her experience rather than presenting her experience as she did originally in this draft as layers of an onion. The layering doesn't work as a technique for organisation in the thesis. P demands an ordering - a linear development - which A accommodates, not as we might expect through a reorganisation of theme /new development but by moving the " undisciplined /becoming" text to another section of the thesis. In effect, she "disciplines" and "makes static" the text through a taxonomising according to the writer (ie. Morley as contemporary art critic is now grouped with the chapter on contemporary art).

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**Moment 3: Drafts 19 and 20:** A comparison (P's comments inserted in **bold**, some of the original Friedrich quote has been deleted).

In this given space, Friedrich, a deeply patriotic and religious artist believed that only through landscape could he capture his most powerful feeling regarding the ecstasy of death and the belief that God was closely felt in nature (**source?**). Friedrich's painting of landscape evokes the infinity of the Mathematical sublime with eerie apprehension and in the absence of precise concepts conveys spiritual dimension. **(How exactly?)**

In *Monk by the sea* 1809, Friedrich saw himself as the reflective monk:

A man walking along the beach, deep in thought clad in black garments...a gentle wind blows over them [his footsteps] and will obliterate every trace of you, foolish man puffed up with vain conceit (Friedrich cited in Borsch-Supan, 1974, p.7). It is as if a gentle wind has blown over the painting *Monk by the sea* ...something ...unseen like the tiny cry of the wave on the dark ocean"(for full text see A's draft 19, moment 1) **(this style is far too poetic for a thesis)**.

*A's re written version of this page: p.20 (draft 20)*

In the silence of this 'space', Friedrich, believed that only through landscape could he capture his most powerful feeling regarding the belief that God was closely felt in nature.<sup>1</sup> Why ...do I so frequently choose death, transience and the grave as subjects for my paintings? One must submit oneself many times to death in order some day to attain eternal life" (cited in Borsch-Supan, 1974, p.9). Friedrich's painting of *Monk by the Sea* evokes the infinity of mathematical Sublime with eerie apprehension conveyed through the measurement

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<sup>1</sup> Of significance to Friedrich was ... (Gowing, 1993, p.226)

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of space, low foreground and a middle ground that merges the expanse of sky. [**Double ticks from P**]

*Commentary:* A uses already extant abstractions of experience from art and other theory and taxonomies of the sublime. She hunts for theory as a way to give voice to her experience in her discipline area. Her experience sits outside the linguistic and texturing, and she uses the theoretical/grammatical renderings extant in order to allow for a rendering of her experience. She DOES NOT move from a grammatical rendering of material/concrete experience in experiential grammar toward abstraction, but must and does desire entry at the abstract level. In fact, P actively resists such attempts in the more poetic discussions developed by A in drafting her discussion of the sublime. Grammatical abstraction, rather than being used to develop abstraction from more material concrete texturings, is a device, facilitative of one way (among others) of communicating an experience.


For A, beyond the texturing effects of grammatical abstraction and periodicity, metaphor acted as a cloaking of experience, a silencing of aspects of her experience as it was 'understood' in her writing. As such, grammatical metaphor was a place for and result of a particular negotiation between the non-linear and ineffable complexities of A's experience and her competent execution of writing tasks for her higher degree.

We would suggest, rather than simply an authoritative linguistic and texturing technique, abstraction allows both the writing subject and the subject who writes to extrapolate from the personal, emotional and psychic to the impersonal, the conceptual, the abstract. Rather than grammatical metaphor being a way in which A could become an appropriate and compliant writing subject, it afforded her the capacity to render into academic written form a version or versions of her experience.

## **EXCESS AND THE SUBJECT WHO WRITES**

What we are suggesting is that neither only the text, nor necessarily only the simple process of textual production, needs to be appreciated in writing pedagogy. We are not arguing that the written text needs to be an expression of feelings but that the

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subject who writes is a subject principally constructed through affect who brings with them an embodied history. There must be some way of accommodating the complexities of affective subjective experience in coming to write and learning to write.


### ***Becoming - Temporal Paradox***

What A's account, as it emerges in a more complete telling, gives us is a de-centring of the written product, a movement away from thinking about the writing subject and a focusing on the contingencies of becoming. We have juxtaposed ideas of foreclosure and elaboration, not simply in terms of the 'mastery' of the technologies of writing, but more in terms of the foreclosing process of developing an academic subjectivity, a self that writes like an academic (the writing subject), in juxtaposition to a more elaborated self (the subject who writes).

In this paper, we have worked with a view of excess to allow becoming to emerge in its fragments, to resist cohesion and consequently to allow us to re-examine the interdependency of subjectivities of the subject who writes and those of us who are language and learning practitioners. Butler (1997) foregrounds this interdependency:

A critical evaluation of subject formation may well offer a better comprehension of the double binds to which our emancipation efforts occasionally lead without, in consequence, evacuating the political. Is there a way to affirm complicity as the basis of political agency, yet insist that political agency may do more than reiterate the conditions of subordination? If, as Althusser implies, becoming a subject requires a kind of mastery indistinguishable from submission, are there perhaps political and psychic consequences to be wrought from such a founding ambivalence? The temporal paradox of the subject is such that, of necessity, we must lose the perspective of a subject already formed in order to account for our own becoming. That "becoming" is no simple or continuous affair, but an uneasy practice of repetition and its risks, compelled

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yet incomplete, wavering on the horizon of social being  
(1997, p. 30).

Butler enables us to move beyond the Foucauldian notions of regulation and discipline, to see the subject involved in a process of becoming, iteratively engaged in and resistant to constraint, enabled, in various ways and to various degrees, by the process of realisation.<sup>2</sup>

The desire to 'know' and view in text the 'meanings' of A's artwork keyed us into the second crucial dimension we have attempted to place in view. Beyond meaning, A's experience is a sensory and emotional one, an embodied experience that she found impossible to render into words. For A, this is a productive space of great tension – the space between the linguistic, textual and cognitive on the one hand, and the emotional, embodied, and psychological on the other.

## **CONCLUSION**

We are not suggesting that a Cartesian dualism be reinvoked. What we are suggesting is that considerations of the academic writing subject **MUST** take account of the physiological and 'lived' affective experience of the writer – before, after and during writing processes. If affect precedes and modulates the cognitive, what then does the account of A's learning to write tell us about the modulating force between these two? Becoming a subject is a process that precedes and exceeds the process of learning to write, and learning to write as a different kind of subject.

We want to resist constructions of student writers as affectively neutral writing machines. Much writing pedagogy assumes a writing subject who is affectively neutral. We argue that writing pedagogies must take into account the way in which the subject is always already foreclosed and constrained in their responses to and investments in (including their urgencies, risks, desires and motivations) the process

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<sup>2</sup> Grosz's work on becoming resonates with the work of Halliday and his discussions of realisation as a semiotic process of instantiation. See also Matthiessen. Though there is no time or room here, we would also suggest that the 'learning how to mean' work of Halliday provides useful, grounded research for the ideas of realisation and its iterative relationship to elaboration and foreclosure.

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of writing. We leave you and ourselves with a question: How can we as tertiary literacy and learning practitioners work with this view of the subject who writes?

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