

THE (IM)POSSIBILITIES IN TEACHING UNIVERSITY
WRITING IN THE ANGLO-AMERICAN TRADITION
WHEN DEALING WITH CONTINENTAL STUDENT
WRITERS

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Abstract. Writing centres and writing tutors are an American invention. For us Europeans it is a case of cultural importation. If we import American manuals, handouts, even on-line tutoring services on academic writing, it may collide with continental ways of writing and of teaching and tutoring writing at the university. We see the diversity in the European traditions and styles of writing as one of the major challenges to writing centres and their staff outside the US. The development from elite universities to mass universities adds to the problem, and we believe that at the modern mass university it is almost impossible to teach and tutor our students to write in a traditional continental way. This article lines up the problems with teaching academic writing to continental writers and sketches out the historical, economical, cultural and pedagogical background, and we put forward some suggestions for advising and tutoring the continental writers, and how and when to place the continental writing within studies at the modern mass universities.

Keywords: Academic genres, Anglo-American tradition/writing, Continental tradition/writing, Problem oriented writing, Scientific writing, and Topic oriented writing.

I THE PROBLEM

A German Ph.D. student approached us at a seminar and told us that she had studied both in Germany and at a US university, and she found the ways of writing she had been taught at odds with one another. She gave us an article by an Australian, Michael Clyne (1987) who has researched the national differences in student and scholarly writing in a number of countries, concentrating on the observable differences in Anglo-American and German scientific and scholarly articles and student term papers. (Other observers on this matter are Anna Duszak (1997) and Susan Peck MacDonald (1987, 1994)). Clyne's article finally verbalised an observation we

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Rienecker, L. & Stray Jørgensen, P. (2003). The (Im)Possibilities in Teaching University Writing in the Anglo-American Tradition when Dealing with Continental Student Writers. In: G. Rijlaarsdam (Series Ed.) & L. Björk, G. Bräuer, L. Rienecker & P. Stray Jørgensen (Volume Eds.), Studies in Writing, Volume 12, Teaching Academic Writing in European Higher Education, pp. 101-112. © 2003 Kluwer Academic Publishers. Printed in the Netherlands.

had done before. We notice two different kinds of writing from the students who use our tutoring service.

2 THE ANGL0-AMERICAN MODE OF WRITING

A large body of students study and write in an Anglo-American tradition of doing and writing research. The typical features of studies within the Anglo-American tradition are that they are often empirical, based on real-world objects, people and events, problem-based, methodologically oriented, systematic, argumentatively written, in a clear, concise, unmistakable and often quite impersonal language. The subject matter is in the foreground, not the scholars who wrote the studies – sometimes you scarcely remember their names. We are thinking of all the empirical works and surveys so prominent in post-war social, historical, linguistic and psychological studies. This Anglo-American tradition springs from the natural and social sciences, but is now very common in the humanities where we teach, as well.

3 THE CONTINENTAL MODE OF WRITING

On the Continent especially there is another prominent mode of research and academic writing: University departments of for instance Theology and other subjects in the Humanities such as Philosophy, Arts and Literature have a strong tradition of writing focused on interpretations of the great European thinkers such as Barthes, Bourdieu, Buber, Derrida, Eco, Freud, Heidegger, Jaspers, Kierkegaard, Lacan, Marx, (to mention just a few). There are of course also Anglo-American representatives, but we want to stress the continental angle. Furthermore, we are not saying that writing about a continental thinker classifies a text as 'continental'. It clearly does not; it is the form and the approach to the text – not the topic –, which may define it as written in an Anglo-American or a continental tradition.

The studies and the term papers on the continental thinkers and written in the continental mode are often interpretative, hermeneutical and epistemological in nature, as this research question from a term paper in Philosophy exemplifies: 'The concept of freedom is fundamental in existentialism. This paper focuses on Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of freedom and its meaning for human existence'. What makes this formulation a continental one in our view is firstly the absence of an explicit problem in the research question, secondly the focus is on the interpretation of a concept linked to a particular thinker (as opposed to: as observed empirically), and thirdly, the broadness of the parameter: 'the meaning of human existence' has a scope often seen in continental writing. Another example: a continentalist stronghold of teachers in the Psychology Department in an internal manual advise their students to use (and recycle!) the research question: 'What is (... any concept from the realm of emotion/cognition/volition) really?' In this paper, it is required that the student includes a high number of theoretical psychological thinkers 'as knights around the Round Table' (as expressed by a subject teacher). Over the years, this highly theoretical continental paper placed in the 4th semester has spurred the highest number of contacts to the Academic Writing Centre than any other single as-

ignment in the department. Besides being concept-laden and theoretically heavy, the continental texts are sometimes ripe with metaphors typical of literary texts, and always linguistically demanding.

Although the writing we are thinking of here is theoretical, there also seems to be a continental way of doing empirical studies. Its features may be comprehensive-ness, all-inclusiveness pertaining to the topic, and topic-based rather than problem-based exposition. An example from a master's thesis research question: 'What are the prefixes of the field names on the Faroe Islands?' We observe that continental research questions often begin with 'what' or 'who', whilst Anglo-American research questions more often use 'why' and 'how'. Of course, styles of writing and reporting scientific endeavours know no boundaries; we are referring to tendencies, probably more discipline-specific than national. At Danish universities, we see both cultures represented, very often present within the same institute, but it seems to us that the Anglo-American tradition is the most widespread culture. It is also the dominant culture, in step with the economical possibilities and the current political climate, for instance the political demand for internationalisation of research.

We sum up the main characteristics of the two important traditions of scientific writing at European universities in table 1.

Table 1. *The Continental and the Anglo-American Scientific Writing.*

| ← A continuum → | |
|---|--|
| <i>Continental (German-Romanic) tradition</i> | <i>Anglo-American (British-American) tradition</i> |
| • 'Think'-texts (see below) | • Problem solving texts |
| • Sources in the foreground | • Problems in the foreground |
| • Philosophy, the history of ideas, epistemology, culture, spirit and mind, arts and aesthetics | • Facts, realities, observable matters, empiricism |
| • Emphasis on concepts and theories (methods) | • Emphasis on methods (concepts, theories) |
| • Interpretation (preservation) of traditional culture | • New understandings, evaluations and actions |
| • Contingent epistemology | • Controlled, purposeful epistemology |
| • Numerous points, claims, conclusions, around the subject | • One point, one claim, one conclusion |
| • Often a non-linear, discursive structure ('Exkurse'), digressions allowed | • Linear structure, digressions discouraged |
| • Academic writing as art and inborn abilities | • Academic writing as learned craftsmanship |

Examples of text-genres typical of the continental writing are: The interpretive/reflective philosophical essay, the textbook, the biography, and the monograph. Examples of text-genres typical of Anglo-American writing are: The empirically based study, and the systematically and up-to-date literature-based research paper.

We acknowledge of course that our picture is simplifying, and that we are indicating tendencies only, and that there is a good deal of overlapping.

Note that the genre we have in mind is the scientific research paper (and genres of graduate education derived from this such as theses and dissertations). We do not address other genres written in college and at university for training purposes, for instance essays, for which the rules and demands may be much broader.

4 THINKING AND PROBLEM SOLVING

These different modes in academic writing spring from fundamentally different perceptions of the nature of science: The continental tradition emphasises science as thinking, whilst the Anglo-American tradition emphasises science as investigation and problem solving. Nevertheless, there is no necessary contradiction here: The following quotations of what we consider authoritative sources evidently demonstrate the difference:

Science and scientific thinking begin where I am prepared to believe in my own thoughts, make them explicit, relates them to the opinions of others and enters the results of my thinking into the scientific discourse. (Our italics).

Science has, according to this definition, nothing to do with scientific method, with abstraction, formal language, objectivity etc. Science is primarily a social activity. Precisely stated, it begins with the publication of our thoughts in that particular moment when we do not consider the thoughts as a private matter, but as a social contribution to epistemology' (our translation). (Krusse 1997b: 72).¹²

Research is simply gathering the information you need to answer a question and thereby help you solve a problem.' (Booth, Colomb & Williams 1995: 6).

Text-features, which distinguish continental university writing from that of Anglo-American university writing, are listed in table 2.

Along these lines, according to empirical studies carried out by Michael Clyne, a key-difference between Anglo-American and especially German writing in higher education is that while *structure* is a primary concern in the Anglo-American tradition of writing in academe, *content* is all-important in the continental tradition. Anglo-American teachers will comment on and punish the *inclusion* of material which is subject-relevant, but which clutters the overall structure and argumentative pur-

¹²The original German text:

'Wissenschaft und wissenschaftliches Denken beginnen dort, wo ich bereit bin, meinen eigenen Denken zu trauen, es zu explizieren, auf die Meinungen andere zu beziehen und seine Resultate in den wissenschaftlichen Diskurs einzubringen.

Wissenschaftlichkeit hat, dieser Bestimmung entsprechend, primär nichts mit wissenschaftlicher Methode, mit Abstraktion, formaler Sprache, Objektivität usw. zu tun. Wissen schließt vielmehr eine soziale Handlung (einmal gesagt) beginnt sie mit der Veröffentlichung unserer Gedanken, mit dem Moment aber, an dem wir das Denken nicht mehr als Privatangelegenheit sondern als soziale Aufgabe der Erkenntnisgewinnung

pose of the text. Continental teachers will be more likely to comment on *omissions* of content, which could be seen as subject-relevant, thus promoting breadth of information even at the cost of focus and a clear structure. (At our writing centre, we have heard Ph.D. students from Southern European universities complain that the worst thing that could possibly happen is to overlook some obscure article, which the professor happens to know. 'They expect that no stone is left un-turned'). As one senior lecturer at our university observed the difference: 'All you have to do is read both German and American articles, and you will notice a vast difference in breadth and detail of information, level of theorising and abstraction, even sentence-length.' As we see it, Anglo-American, and especially American university writing, and the teaching of it, is heavily influenced by rhetoric and rhetorical text-concerns such as purpose, aim, reader, focus, structure and argumentation. (The ironic part of it is that classical rhetoric is very much a European 'invention'. Rhetoric seems to have been almost forgotten in continental European academic writing, while American and British teachers of writing have reintroduced the classical rhetoricians).

Table 2. Text-features in Continental Writing.

Text features in Continental Writing

- Frequent research questions:
 - What is the inherent content of...
 - What did X really mean?
 - What lies behind...
- The development of X's thoughts
- Who influenced whom and by what?
- What are the similarities/contrasts/contradictions between X and Y?
- Structures which do not necessarily follow fixed patterns
- Excursions, digressions and associations
- Short introductions, little metacommunication, little reader-information
- Long paragraphs, few sub-headers
- High number of abstract concepts
- Linguistic complexity and abstraction
- Varied language, reformulations, varied use of concepts
- In student papers: often source-influenced language
- Reflections of the writer's personality (and possibly originality) in reasoning, thoughts, conclusions as well as in style.

5 THE VIRTUES AND THE DIFFICULTIES OF THE CONTINENTAL TRADITION

We acknowledge that many very interesting (also students') contributions of the humanities come from the continental writers of for instance reflective essays – think of Habermas, Lyot and (children (through the latter is not from the continent), and

great biographies of historical persons. All of this is writing that helps us view and interpret people and culture in thought-provoking ways. And is this not what the Humanities are supposed to do? Are we always really all that interested in systematic, methodological, intersubjectively controllable empirical studies, which just hand us the facts? Does not every lecturer in the humanities think that the best thing that could happen for his or her university would be for the next Heidegger to walk out of the university gates? At our faculty of humanities, many of the successful and prestigious young researchers adhere to the continental tradition, they are reflective philosophers and cultural theoreticians with a very broad scope of knowledge and association to draw on and cite (and name-drop!) They are not merely out to 'investigate a (one!) problem' in a linear fashion, rendered in a pre-fabricated argumentative format from a textbook (see for instance Neman 1995, Booth *et al.* 1995) or on a handout from the writing centre, the kind you can obtain in most Online Writing Labs (see for instance Purdue University!).

But are these kinds of writing teachable, even at the university level? (And another disturbing question is: Do they represent science? A number of the continental primary texts are published as books, and have never been intended as or handed in to be judged at any university on their scientific merit, and are thus very confusing to students. Good questions are: 'If Lacan tried to hand this book in as a Ph.D. project at my university, would he even pass? Am I supposed to write *like* Lacan, or *about* him, but in a very different style?' The flip side of the coin is all the writing problems that get piled up where the continental writing is most prominent in higher education: It is exactly at those departments where the continental writing is in vogue (such as Philosophy, Theology and Literary Science) that students and public surveys carried out by the Ministry of Education report and criticise the great number of drop-outs, prolonged studies, 'thesis-swamp' and problems with even minor written assignments, and it is also often from these departments we hear the most student complaints about the lack of instruction, and where we see some really poor writing and total misunderstanding of the task. It is here we often hear students and teachers speak of 'the art of writing a thesis' – and not the craft! In fact, if it were not for the writing problems of the Humanities and the bad-will it has generated among politicians and the general public, there would not be a writing centre at our university in the first place. It is no coincidence that the need first arises in the humanities departments, and not in the natural or social sciences. You may argue that the need for writing centre facilities is reinforced where continental ways of researching and writing are strong.

6 PROBLEMS FOR THE CONTINENTAL WRITERS

The continental students' writing problems as we see them, consist of difficulties with

- Living up to their demanding and difficult literary idols
- Finding and maintaining a focus
- Selecting, sorting, using, transforming and acknowledging sources
- Understanding and decoding difficult primary sources

- Getting beyond mere restatement and reformulations of the thoughts of others
- Writing in too little or too much of the writer's own 'voice'
- Quoting too much and writing conceptually and linguistically too close to sources.

Thus, there are extreme quality polarisations in continental writing. It can be very good, and it can be terribly bad. Likewise, some students become very successful in their endeavours, but many drop out, or fall behind with their term papers, which are written with great difficulty. On the other hand it is relatively easier in the Anglo-American teaching research and academic writing tradition to help a great number of students write good papers, pass their exams and graduate.

What do our students make of it? And what do we, the writing centre staff, do? Teach different traditions of writing as separate sets of guidelines? We do not, for a number of reasons. Firstly, we do not see the continental way of writing as an appropriate training mode for new (young) students. We stick to teaching and tutoring the Anglo-American way of writing, and to teaching those features of academic writing, which may be common ground (examples are: How to handle sources, formalities and many aspects of writing process). And besides: In fact we are not able to provide the continental writers with *continental concrete and operational* criteria for 'The Good Paper, formats of structures *etc.*', because to some extent such criteria cannot be generalised: They are specific to their discourse communities and to the individual teacher.

7 THE TWO WRITING TRADITIONS AND THEIR WRITING PEDAGOGIES

We believe that the way you teach writing springs from your understanding of the genre you teach and that genre's criterion of quality (see Rienecker and Jørgensen elsewhere in this volume). All American manuals for college writing include basic structures and lists of criteria and heuristics for the existing types of papers. The Anglo-American tradition makes it possible to teach writing in large classes, or from books, manuals and handouts on for instance how to write a research question, how to use methods to collect and analyse data, how to criticise the use of methods, how to structure a paper, what to include in an introduction and a conclusion *etc.*, because it is expected to be done in conventionalised ways. Thus, the Anglo-American writing style has a complementary pedagogy, which can be used in writing courses, workshops and writing centres, as well as for on-line help services, writing software *etc.* The instruction can be taken care of by writing tutors (who may even be students and can relatively easily be instructed on what to tell the young writers, see for instance Ryan: 'The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors', 1994). Essential in the Anglo-American teaching of writing is the use of heuristics. Heuristics for writing (parts of) papers are on most Writing Lab home pages.

But how do you teach how to write a bachelor project focusing on how to understand Lacan, Popper, Kierkegaard or Bourdieu without juxtaposing the thinker in question with other thinkers or empirical phenomena or cases? It seems very hard to put forward general guidelines, instructions, concrete criteria of qualities, because continental ways of writing are bound by more or less tacit rules that are specific to

certain teachers and certain circles and not to commonly accepted rules and are not at the moment suitable for any on-line handout service – except maybe if written by those very same subject teachers. The features and formats of continental texts are closely connected with the author and his/her discourse community. As one continental philosophy-teacher put it: 'We do not instruct before writing, our students are supposed to sit at the feet of their masters and absorb their writing themes and styles'.

8 DECLINE OF THE ELITE UNIVERSITY

In the 'old fashioned' universities, the students did just that. This was the time when you found – in the opinion of some – Heaven on university campuses; it was an era with fewer, more able and independent students: more time for teacher-student contact; narrower fields of knowledge, and longer studies with little time pressure.

The current pedagogical challenges in higher education are the results of the changing status of universities during the last three or four decades. In the fifties and sixties, the universities were elite institutions. It was easier then to uphold the notion that writing instruction was solely the task of the school system. Up through the seventies and eighties most universities in Europe changed from elite to mass universities with much broader intakes of students, and no longer just the 'best' 5-10 percent. Some of the problems are connected with the fact that universities no longer are 'what they used to be.' This development has subsequently altered the conditions of the pedagogy in general, and consequently the ways of teaching students how to write in particular. It is not possible for the teacher to take care of every single one of 'his' students. To write well in a difficult genre such as 'the knowledgeable cultural essay' takes time, reflection, courage and often personal guidance, and for this time is scarce. The students are too many and there is not enough room at the feet of the masters for all of them. What we see is that the traditional university pedagogy of the apprenticeship (German: 'Meisterlehre') is threatened, the masses are moving in, but pedagogy for the masses does not fit the task or the variety of text-subgenres required.

The continentalists have lost their prime pedagogy with the change in student-teacher ratio, whereas the Anglo-Americans in higher education have identified genres and text types needed and a corresponding pedagogy for the needs of the mass university. So the Anglo-American-influenced writing programs and centres have a hard time offering instruction and tutoring within the many varieties of continental discourse – just as individuality, originality and personality of expression may well be considered unteachable per definition or at least impossible to formalise.

Continentalist teachers as a general rule do not believe in instructional materials, or any kind of instruction before or during writing other than one-on-one dialogue, and many teachers do not even believe in or practice more thesis-advising than the minimum required by their department. (Several of our older philosophy teachers pride themselves of keeping advising to a minimum, thus leaving the writing of papers the most difficult of all university papers up to the students themselves.) Interestingly, we cannot find instructional materials, books *etc.* for students of the conti-

mental tradition (the only possible exception being Umberto Eco's book on thesis-writing which has continental elements). Thus they are left with much less instruction in and dialogue about their writing than the students of Anglo-American scientific cultures, although the continental writers face much greater challenges with regard to writing because they have no concrete rules or formats to guide them.

9 OUR WRITING CENTRE'S ANGLO-AMERICAN WAY OF TEACHING ACADEMIC WRITING

In our teaching, a most prominent and important activity is the demonstration and discussion of model examples from student writing (see Rienecker and Stray Jörgensen: 'The Genre in Focus, not the Writer...' this volume). This kind of teaching is only possible because we and a majority of the students present have – or are just beginning to acknowledge – criteria and text formats that are so widespread that they can be shared and reinforced.

What we do is schooling in 'How to do it the Anglo-American way.' We will focus strongly on the research question and make sure every paper does in fact investigate a problem, that the structure of the paper reflects the problem-investigation, that methods can be stated explicitly, that university papers are in fact an argument, that (student) research is written so that it may be labelled 'intersubjectively controllable', and that research papers are written in a clear and unambiguous language.

This we see as in keeping with the political intentions behind establishing writing centres: We are supposed to limit research tasks to a manageable level so that more students will feel able and confident to do it, and to understand the workings of and evaluate the academic writing of others. It is our role to be the 'simplifiers', not the 'complicators', yet we must not oversimplify matters.

Where are the continental students at those sessions and what do they say? Precious little. We have the impression that they do not often attend the writing centre activities because they know full well that what they must do is to stick closely to their subject teachers.

10 HOW CAN THE ANGLO-AMERICAN WRITING CENTRE ADDRESS THE CONTINENTAL WRITERS?

One problem that we frequently encounter is a complaint from students that what they have been told about writing has been contradictory and sometimes not consistent with what we say at the writing centre workshops. The different writing traditions have not been made explicit to them. When we verbalise the different modes and different ideals of the two traditions, it is often a startling eye-opening experience. The consciousness of the existing traditions and your own possible choices between and within them is one of our goals in the teaching of writing.

10.1 *Anglo-Americanise Papers as Much as Possible*

When it comes to the individual writer's handling of her/his own text, we will bear in mind that those who consult us are experiencing problems with their paper, and we will try to suggest that the writer:

- Narrow the focus of the text, make a point, and organise documentation within an argumentation structure.
- Look for a problem to investigate.
- Exemplify more concretely.
- Include analysis of empirical material.
- Pay attention to questions of methodology, both as to methods used by the sources and methods the writer might want to use in his or her own writing.
- Write in a language that shows that the writer has absorbed the content and not just the jargon of his sources.

All of these might be considered typical Anglo-American features of university writing. We will in fact examine the individual writer's possibilities of writing within a continental discourse community in a more Anglo-American way, thus making the paper more manageable.

10.2 *Use the Teachers as Much as Possible*

No matter how our tutoring is received, we will always encourage especially continental students to ask their teachers for guidance and advice on how to write, and to study the writing styles of their individual teachers, rather than relying on general advice, in order to get as close to the ideal continental writing apprenticeship situation as possible.

10.3 *Keep a Distance from the Sources*

It is important too to tell the continental university writers that to write their papers in the same genre as those works of the great names they are writing about – books which may contain speculative and hypothetical constructions of ideas are difficult, even risky business and requires the support of the subject teacher. Often these important and weighty works would not get through the eye of the needle of science because of lack of documentation, evidence, methodology, clarity – although these works are indispensable sources of inspiration, valuable points of departure for further research or theoretical tools for explaining data.

10.4 *Continental Writing is Best Suited for Advanced Levels*

On an *institutional* level, we are of the opinion that the reflecting, philosophical essay is not an appropriate kind of training text at early levels of studying. University writing, at introductory levels, we suggest, can best be taught within the Anglo-American formats and criteria.

Continental writing as a study activity is a challenge for those who master the basics of academic writing and are already very knowledgeable in the field, have an overview (In German: 'Überblick') which allows them to acknowledge the aspects, the different points of view and conflicts, the significance and the intricacies of the continental thinkers and their discourse communities. Therefore, we find that writing in the continental tradition – if necessary or desirable at all – should not take place at least until the later stages of study, when some sort of apprenticeship relation between teacher and student is a realistic possibility.

Consequently we would propose to planners of education in continental surroundings a *progression* in the teaching of writing from the more manageable Anglo-American approaches, with emphasis on focused problem investigation towards a more comprehensive, hermeneutical treatment of the subjects in their entirety – a continental approach.

11 REACTIONS FROM CONTINENTAL STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

We have many – unsystematic – experiences with tutoring students writing in a continental tradition. We often find them taking our advice and benefiting from them in terms of completion and higher grades. We have often heard the remark: 'My teacher is sceptical of the Writing Centre, yet when I took your advice he approved of my paper.' We believe that Anglo-American modes of writing are widely recognised as acceptable modes of academic writing far beyond where they are practised. But when we address the two university cultures openly, the issue invites conflict, more than what seems productive. At a meeting of 60 faculty members titled 'The Continental and the Anglo-American Writing at the University – a Discussion of Pedagogies' in which we attempted a debate, mutual withdrawal was the result. An invited speaker known to be a good representative of continental writing took a defensive stance, titled his speech 'We Are Already Dead', and lamented Anglo-American influence on university writing.

We hear from several disciplines that their institutes are torn in two rather irreconcilable parts. As one teacher told us: 'At a teachers meeting, we all tried to read sample papers and justify our evaluations. I don't think we will ever repeat the experience, we are just too far apart.' Experiences like these show how necessary it is for student writers to be aware of cultures of writing. Discipline-specific writing is not nearly enough to guarantee adequacy, there are strong sub-cultures within (some) disciplines.

12 THE CRAFT, NOT THE ART

The continental way works for some students, whereas Anglo-American writing instruction in higher education works for most.

As writing centre staff we should be conscious of possible limitations in our own knowledge of text genres and conventions which are used in our institutions, and hence in our relevance to some of the discourse communities present within them. We can teach and tutor the general and common principles, but not all the discourse

specific features of university sub-genres, and not the individual and original presentations and wordings. We can teach students the craft, but not the art of writing.