

Book Reviews

Thesen, L and Cooper, L. (eds.) 2014. *Risk in Academic Writing: Postgraduate Students, their Teachers and the Making of Knowledge*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

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Risk in Academic Writing: Postgraduate Students, their Teachers and the Making of Knowledge is a very timely publication, given the current interest worldwide in postgraduate studies and postgraduate supervision. This edited volume covers topics related to postgraduate studies at masters and doctoral level, largely with a focus on academic writing. The volume contains studies on academic writing principally at the University of Cape Town, South Africa, but with contributions from the United States (Suresh Canagarajah and Ena Lee) and the United Kingdom (Mary Scott). The final two chapters reflecting on the case studies by Teresa Lillis and Brenda Cooper eloquently and appropriately summarise the book and praise its contents, as well as the form in which many of the pieces have been written, but they take forward the discussion begun in the volume about risk, voice, agency and resistance.

The volume reflects on the idea of ‘risk’, which it rescues from its connotations of deficit and danger, and which it allies, rather, with concepts of ‘productiveness’, ‘resistance’, ‘voice’, and the breaking of rigid boundaries. The volume also looks more carefully at experiences of students and academics in the global south, in postcolonial and hybrid spaces. It is highly welcome and refreshing to read the writers talking back to the global north, although Lillis does pose some valid challenges to this geographical polarisation, asking if there is only one ‘north’. In doing so she is reflecting on her own working class origins in the north of England during Margaret Thatcher’s conservative rule. Ironically, one of the authors now functioning as a gatekeeper in the global north, Suresh Canagarajah, one time editor of the *TESOL* (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages) *Quarterly*, now reflects on his attempts to mentor a student from the south, whereas he in fact originates from a ex-colonial context, Sri Lanka. The volume thus emphasises the significance of locale and era, but at the same time, calls into question what precisely *is* the global north and south? Are ‘north’ and ‘south’ markers of geography or of social class and power, and to what extent or how are these markers related?

Book reviews

The volume is useful in exploring issues of voice, power, knowledge and gatekeeping. It is worth reading partly because of the self-reflexive manner in which these issues are explored from the point of view of the student, the journal editor, the supervisor or writing-circle facilitator. It contains some interesting approaches which could be used by others working in the domain of academic literacy, for example the writing circle (Clement Chihota and Lucia Thesen) and an ethnopoetic approach to analyse student 'error' (Mary Scott).

The editors intentionally allowed for interpretations of risk from a variety of theoretical approaches, including actor network theory (Moeain Arend), the third space and post-structuralism (Kate Cadman) and experiential learning theories (Linda Cooper). Many chapters critically reflect on dominant concepts such as 'genre' – of which Moragh Paxton asks poetically, is it a 'pigeon hole' or a 'pigeon'? In other words, is the concept of genre overly restricting, or does it encourage creativity? One of the strengths of the volume for those who enjoy reading about academic work is its immersion in practice, and the resultant sensitively conveyed detail. The editors write that the book is exploring risk 'from below'. Perhaps 'below', i.e., the coal-face or the 'swampy lowlands of practice' (Schön, 1983), is another form of the global south, in a world where theory is valorised over practice?

This detail in many of the studies is more evocative, and in fact more provocative, than the more overtly theoretical discussions. One example of this provocation is the self-study by Somikazi Deyi about her struggle to write her masters thesis in isiXhosa. She succeeds in doing this, but at a substantial cost to her own voice, which is ironic. Although she was writing in isiXhosa, which is a language rich in idiom and imagery that she refers to as the 'creamy layer', such is the academic's anxiety for academic writing to be conventional and to adhere to the dominant genre that she was required to deplete her writing of this creaminess. One of the successful outcomes of her attempt is that she became involved in programmes which promoted the use of African languages, and co-authored a book on the teaching of mathematics using isiXhosa. This study begs the question whether it is the choice of language or the choice of register which allows for writers' sense of 'voice' to emerge. This was probably not her intention, but her beautifully described journey does call into question the feasibility of the frequent calls for the academicisation of African and/or indigenous languages, most strongly led by Neville Alexander (1989).

A chapter which is also extremely evocative in its detail, and which also reflects on issues such as choice of register and speech genres, is that of Linda Cooper. She writes about adult and non-traditional students making their way into academia. Cooper's chapter begins with an enticing question of whether drawing on students' prior learning can impede their

Book reviews

acquisition of the dominant academic discourses. She links this with debates on the relationship between the literature on experiential learning associated with authors such as Tara Fenwick, and the literature on the power of formal, academic knowledge associated with writers such as Michael Young and Johan Muller. It is a great pity that she does not return to this debate at the end of the chapter, pronouncing on the relationship or comparative value of these two approaches, as the debate between them has tended to become polarised – see for example Leesa Wheelahan (2010) who sharply criticises constructivist and experiential approaches to the curriculum.

The chapters by Deyi and Cooper are extremely strong and set a tone of respect for the struggles of learners to be heard and to make sense of the world they are learning about. As indicated above, the studies perhaps raise more questions than answers. This is one of the strengths of the book: it deliberately opens rather than closes; it suggests rather than tells; and it asks rather than answers. There is one more question it calls into being: if ‘risk’ is associated with creativity, voice, or boundary crossing, then what is a word which is loudly silent in the book, i.e., ‘safety’, associated with? Is safety about convention, hedging and hegemony? Or alternatively, is the kind of hegemony exerted in the academy ultimately excluding, violent and thus in a circular sense, more risky than risk itself?

Reviewed by Brenda Leibowitz

Faculty of Education, University of Johannesburg

Email: brendal@uj.ac.za

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