What Makes Writing Academic: Rethinking Theory For Practice, By Molinari, J. (2022)

Ebtehal Mohammed Alsuhayl[1] , Abeer Shujaa Alharbi (corresponding author)[2]

Introduction

Julia Molinari's book "What Makes Writing Academic: Rethinking Theory for Practice" questions the Popular view of academic writing in higher education. The book critiques the problematic nature of academic writing, as it is taught in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) as well as Rhetoric and Composition. Moreover, the book argues that academic writing is a complex and socioacademic practice that accommodates various forms, genres, and modalities, criticizing the tendency to view academic writing as a transferable skill and mechanical process.[1] Molinari presented a thought-provoking critique of conventional academic writing from a critical realist perspective. She delves deeper into the history of academic writing and how it has excluded diverse voices and knowledge systems as a privileged form of knowledge demonstration. Understanding this issue has resulted in significant changes in higher education pedagogy.

This well-organized book has five chapters: (1) Troubling Academic Writing: Problems and Implications for Higher Education, (2) How Did We Get Here? A Selected History, (3) What Makes Writing Academic: Learning from Writings "in the Wild," (4) Critical Realism: Reclaiming Theory for Practice, and (5) Foundations for a Future Writing Pedagogy. The five chapters cover general themes addressing the following:
Critique of viewing academic writing as mere skills
Investigating academic writing as a socio-academic practice
Advocate for social justice and diversity in writing pedagogy

Incorporating insights from educational, sociological, and philosophical theories, this book takes an interdisciplinary approach to transcend the typical norms and rules of academic writing. The following discussion provides an overview of each section and summarizes the contents of the chapters.

The first chapter, "Troubling Academic Writing: Problems and Implications for Higher Education," discusses the misunderstandings surrounding academic writing and highlights their consequences. This chapter establishes the theme of setting a foundational critique for reducing academic writing to mere skills. Molinari draws from experience with EAP writing instruction in the UK and references the US tradition of Rhetoric and Composition to explore parallels in understanding academic writing challenges. The first section of this chapter introduces Molinari's argument that understanding academic writing (ontology) is fundamentally linked to its function (epistemology). Reinforced by the assertion that "Ontology

[1]Department of English, College of Education, Majmaah University, Al-Majmaah, 11952, Saudi Arabia. E-mail: 451204851@s.mu.edu.sa Orcid ID: 0009-0004-5637-4279
[2]Department of English, College of Education, Majmaah University, Al-Majmaah, 11952, Saudi Arabia. E-mail: as.alharbi@mu.edu.sa Orcid ID: 0000-0003-3985-0785

and epistemology are co-extensive (p. 18)," this interaction is crucial to comprehend academic writing's full scope.

Contrary to the standard classification of academic writing as formal, objective, or impersonal (as stated by Stephen Bailey, 2006), Molinari posits that academic writing is a transformative activity that should restructure knowledge and engage with academic discourse. This critique emphasizes the need to understand the purpose and nature of academic writing. However, this chapter is significant because of its insightful distinction between the ontological and epistemological aspects of academic writing, which are blurred in educational practice and understanding.

The second part indicates, in my opinion, a significant point that reveals Molinari's perspective on whether academic writing is a skill or practice and how it is related to its academic nature. She criticizes the expansive approach to academic writing instruction in the UK and US for focusing solely on technical skills or practical abilities, which emphasize memorization and passive learning (Graff & Birkenstein, 2006), because it neglects the deeper reflective and critical aspects of writing that form academic discourse. For example, skill-based writing pedagogies and assessments, such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), isolate textual and linguistic features from their social context and lead to the weak academic credibility of written texts (Moore and Morton, 2005 and Warner, 2018).

The third part addresses Molinari's critique of the conceptualization of academic writing instructions in teaching students and the nuance between "écrire": to write and "écriture": writing (Cocteau, 1957, p. 151). She discusses how the typical approach to academic writing is formulaic and emotionless "écriture," unlike the creativity inherent in "écrire." Therefore, the conventional norms of academic writing use impersonal, objective, and explicit expressions. Although these norms facilitate a uniform standard of academic communication, they unintentionally stifle the expressive and creative dimensions of writing. Asserting the importance of recognizing and embracing a variety of linguistic and semiotic practices in academic writing leaves us with Molinari's thoughtful reflection on how these conventional norms of academic writing restrict students' abilities to express their voices and use diverse writing practices within academia.

The second chapter, "How Did We Get Here? A Selected History," delves into how human decision-making and ideology impact academic writing. First, Molinari asserts that understanding the history of writing enables us to break, follow, and adapt rules with knowledge and openness to change, instead of being limited by rigid templates or restrictions (Paxton, 2013). This chapter is worthy of more detail becausse it shows the debate over what counts as "writing" and provides several historical views of the definition of writing. This exploration reveals debates around writing, literacy, and cognition and highlights the need to appreciate how societies record, communicate, and conceptualize their worlds. However, upon critical examination, this section examines the historical and cultural significance of the alphabet. It reveals ideological biases that favor certain forms of literacy over others. Second, Molinari discusses how academic writing has evolved, considering the historical backgrounds of universities and their changing knowledge-sharing methods. Subsequently, the reflection of academic writing as a tool, "Language becomes invested with the responsibility to not simply report what the scientist sees as an objective natural reality but to also persuade a skeptical reader"(Molinari, 2023, p.64) for conveying observations as well as engaging and persuading a critical audience (Russell, 2002; Turner, 2010). Finally, Molinari regards ideology as "worldviews," which is shaped by writing and reflects political and social ideologies that influence the cultural, political, and social contexts in which it is written.

"What Makes Writing Academic: Learning from Writings in the Wild" is the third chapter and, in my opinion, the most important chapter. Molinari advocates a redefinition of academic writing that is more inclusive, diverse, open to various communication methods, and less rigid in its adherence to alphabetic literacy ideologies. This chapter presents Molinari's argument that academic practices and values define academic writing. It uncovers the complexity of what makes something academic by exploring how author intentions, reader perceptions, and socio-academic practices interact. In addition, Molinari argues that academicness is a non-reductive property that emerges from writers' commitments to socioacademic practices (SAPs), their epistemic virtues (EVs), and their innovative use of semiotic resources.

Molinari explores the potential of threshold concepts in writing studies as tools to navigate the complexities of academic writing (Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2015). She indicates that academic writing entails more than just language; it is an active process that mediates activities, enacts identities, and creates ideologies. As such, it challenges writers to engage creatively in textual context. Molinari critically explains how academic argumentation and communication can be enriched using a wider range of modalities beyond language. She criticized the traditional view that language is the primary and most effective medium for expressing complex, higher-order thinking and argumentation in academic writing by challenging the idea that language can fully capture human thought (e.g., Miranda Fricker, 2007; Rudolf Arnheim, 1974; Roy Harris, 2011).

The fourth chapter in this book is "Critical Realism: Re-claiming Theory for Practice." It introduces critical realism as a theoretical framework for understanding academic writing. Academic writing is complex, and neither skill-focused nor practice-based approaches fully capture this complexity. According to Molinari, critical realism provides a nuanced understanding by balancing subjectivity and objectivity. As Molinari stated, "Critical realism is underpinned by three fundamental notions of reality which are referred to as "stratified": the REAL, the ACTUAL, and the EMPIRICAL (Molinari, 2023, p.103-104)." This framework challenges traditional dichotomies. Subsequently, Molinari seeks to challenge and enhance conventional approaches to academic writing by incorporating critical realism, presenting three fundamental theories: (1) Michael Bernard-Donals (1998), who argues against postmodern views that language shapes reality, (2) Donald Judd (2003), who critiques mainstream teaching methods in composition studies for failing to distinguish between transitive and intransitive knowledge, and (3) Deirdre Pratt (2011), who uses critical realism to argue for a more comprehensive and dynamic understanding of reality in writing that emphasizes individual agency within social structures.

By addressing these theories, Molinari aims to accomplish three objectives. First, she provides reasons for and permission to view academic texts differently. Then, she introduces critical realism as a conceptual framework that justifies plural, democratized, multimodal, diverse, and inclusive forms of academic writing. Finally, Molinari promotes pedagogical innovation in academic writing by focusing on social justice and including diverse epistemologies and expressions. While academic writing is dynamic, adopting a broader perspective allows for a strategic, informed, and reflective approach to academic writing practices that transcends formulaic templates and unconstrained inclusivity.

The fifth and last chapter of this book, "Foundations for Future Writing Pedagogy," explores the development of writing pedagogies as tools for change. Molinari discusses 12 changes in academic writing pedagogy to create a more open, nonlinear, transformative, and humane approach that includes multimodal and multilingual elements and broadens academic texts

beyond traditional writing forms. For example, the second and third suggested changes are significant. The second change requires academic writing to be viewed as a creative process of composition (Palmeri, 2012) and, nevertheless, the recursive nature of composing, where elements overlap and intertwine, challenging the traditional linear structure of academic essays (Wardle, 2009). The third, and in my opinion, significant change emphasizes the importance of critical thinking in academic texts over standardized formats.

The remaining changes needed are addressed using multiple methods to improve communication and accessibility. This emphasizes the aim of shifting from plagiarism policies to educational ones, recognizes writing as a subjective representation of knowledge, embraces diverse writing and collaboration, reevaluates clarity from diverse perspectives, broadens the scope of academic writing to foster social justice and inclusivity, considers academic writing as a dynamic and multi-dimensional process, aligns traditional writing genres with modern digital media, utilizes different forms of expression to convey knowledge creatively, and supports linguistic diversity to show respect for sociocultural identities.

Interestingly, Molinari suggests three activities to enhance students' communication skills, which would help them reflect on how their writing impacts the audience and promote collaborative knowledge creation and critical engagement from diverse perspectives. As Molinari stated, "Academic texts are located at the level of the ACTUAL, where change is possible (Molinari, 2022, p.154)." This emphasizes the importance of democratic activation of the judgmental rationality of agencies among university leadership, teachers, and students.

It questions conventional academic writing norms and promotes a more inclusive, diverse, and multimodal approach, making it a valuable resource for ESL/EFL educators. Considering the criticism of academic writing as a mechanical skill, Molinari advocates recognizing the socioacademic practices and values that define academic writing. However, one question is worth mentioning. Although this book introduces critical realism as a new theoretical lens for understanding academic writing, it may not resonate with all readers or be applied universally across disciplines. However, this does not affect the overall quality of Molinari's book, which fosters social justice and embraces students' diverse backgrounds and perspectives.

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