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Becoming a researcher: Re-inventing writing spaces

Jennifer McMullan¹*The Open University, UK/Australian Catholic University, Sydney, Australia*

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ABSTRACT

This paper draws on a three-year study of postgraduate women writers pursuing research degrees at a UK university to explore how they develop identities as academic researchers and writers. Using extracts from written texts, talk-and-text interview transcripts, and writing journals from four postgraduate students in a range of disciplines, I explore the material conditions under which postgraduate women write and the significance of such spaces for the re-invention of themselves as academic writers and researchers. Foregrounding the notion of *place* and *space* (Agnew, 2011), I present extracts from four 'writing tales' (after Lather, 1991) to explore academic writing at postgraduate level. The tales include 'visible' and 'occluded' (Swales, 1996) written genres in academia and document the ways in which these facilitate the enactment of postgraduate academic identity. The use of 'tales' as an analytical unit and as a form of representation provides a mechanism through which multiple data sources are drawn together to illuminate a highly contextualised, and potentially gendered, dimension of postgraduate academic writing.

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1. Introduction

Jane Austen—wrote only in secret on sheets small enough to be concealed in a book in case someone interrupted. And interruptions were frequent, because she wrote in the family living room. These circumstances were not only a result of the family's relative poverty and the presence in the house of an invalid mother, whose care fell to Jane as an unmarried daughter; daughters were also denied the luxury of the 'room of one's own' that Virginia Woolf considered so essential to a writer. Jane Austen thus depended on the squeaky living room door to keep her from being surprised at her guilty endeavour. To the puzzlement of other family members, she always objected when anyone proposed oiling the hinges. (Dulong, 1992, p. 413)

The research presented in this article is intended to contribute to work which seeks to understand the ways in which postgraduate women students engage with writing in the early stages of their academic careers. The larger research study involves 16 participants and focuses on writing carried out during the initial two years of students' postgraduate research study. The research questions were designed to generate insights into the nature of writing for women at this formative stage of their academic trajectories and to consider how their writing of a range of genres afforded spaces for taking on an academic writer and researcher identity. The research questions were as follows:

E-mail address: Jennifer.McMullan@acu.edu.au.

¹ Address: Australian Catholic University, Level 10, 33 Berry St, North Sydney, 2060 PO Box 968, North Sydney, NSW, 2059.

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Table 1

The participants and dataset discussed in this article.

Participant and location/s during interviews	Discipline and topic	Educational background	Number of talk-and-text interviews	Written texts discussed in talk-and-text interviews	Number of writing journal entries
Cosima (Italy and UK)	Education (Digital History)	Undergraduate degree in Italy Pursuing a doctorate in Education	2	Notes in Italian related to the progress of the participant's doctorate. A literature review	7 ²
Yasmin (UK)	Business and Management Studies (Collaboration in the private sector)	Master's degrees in the UK Pursuing a PhD	2	Supervision minutes A written text exploring a topic for supervision	4
Clara (UK)	Business and Management Studies (Communications in Business Meetings)	Master's degrees in the UK Pursuing a PhD	2	A written text exploring a participant's research topic. An abstract for a conference	9
Samantha (UK)	Linguistics (Significance of speech in children's play)	Undergraduate degree in the UK Pursuing a PhD	2	A Master in Research Thesis A thesis chapter An exploratory text commenting on methods	25

1. What are the academic writing practices of research students in the first two years of their research studies at a UK based university?
2. What are the feelings expressed by the participants about the writing they carry out while pursuing research qualifications?
3. In what ways is gender a significant dimension to the participants' academic writing practices?

The research was an ethnographically framed study and the data collected were written texts, talk-and-text interviews (for the latter, see [Lillis, 2008](#), p. 359–362); interview field notes and participant writing journals (for full details, see [McMullan, 2018](#)). A key theme to emerge across the dataset study was that of the importance of *place* and *space* to women re-defining themselves as postgraduate researchers and writers, two linked but separate notions, which are central to this article. Consequently, the specific question that this paper seeks to explore is:

In what ways does a focus on *place* and *space*, in an examination of academic writing practices, illuminate the gendered nature of women's postgraduate academic writing experiences?

This article draws on data related to four of the postgraduate participants to provide a close exploration of the range of conditions under which postgraduate research students write, for example, on commutes to and from work, and in pauses between domestic and family-oriented responsibilities, and the significance attached to such writing practices. A brief overview of the participants and the specific dataset on which this paper draws is in [Table 1](#). The University of Southern England (USE) is used as a pseudonym for the university in which the participants were pursuing research degrees and the pseudonyms in [Table 1](#) are used to refer to the postgraduate participants.

Throughout the article, I suggest that academic writing can usefully be seen as a means of re-inscribing or re-writing lives in ways that are significant to postgraduate researchers. These notions of re-inscription and re-writing are drawn from the work of [Threadgold \(1997\)](#) and [Irigaray \(1985\)](#) whose work centering on the re-writing and re-reading of historical texts ([Threadgold, 1997](#)) and philosophy and psychoanalysis texts ([Deutscher, 2002](#), p. 18) provides insights into the gendered nature of writing (see Introduction this issue). Deutscher usefully frames this dimension of Irigaray's work as foregrounding the ways in which 'generated sedimented conceptions of women, materiality and femininity have come about in conventional texts' ([Deutscher, 2002](#), p. 18). The importance of 'sedimented conceptions of women' for understanding the ways in which the postgraduate students write their ways into academia is evident in the four tales discussed below, where both institutionally visible and 'occluded' genres ([Swales, 1996](#)) are given equal significance.

1.1. Gender and students' academic writing

Research centring specifically on postgraduate academic writing, in line with studies of academic writing research more generally, has tended to focus on the rhetorical features of specific academic texts, notably the PhD thesis. Such work includes a focus on the different organizational structures of theses (e.g. [Thompson, 2005](#)), Introductions and Conclusions (e.g. [Bunton,](#)

² A diary entry is a series of reflections written in one day about the academic writing the postgraduate student is doing that day. They were collected over a period in one academic year, and then again in a second academic year. Therefore, 7 entries = 7 days.

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