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NB!Write: Sustaining writing initiatives through The Nordic and Baltic Network for Writing in Higher Education

Djuddah A.J. Leijen

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1630-7467>

djuddah.leijen@ut.ee

Anna Wärensby

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3352-4102>

anna.warnsby@mau.se

This position paper takes the dichotomy between the unified context for teaching writing and writing research in North America and the diversified contexts for writing in Europe as its point of departure to outline several challenges such diversification in Europe may present to students and staff in higher education. The paper further argues for the need of unifying initiatives and describes the rationale for NB!Write, The Nordic and Baltic Network for Writing in Higher Education and outlines the goals of this initiative. The network strives to determine how the Nordic and Baltic institutional, national, and cultural contexts may help find possible answers to common pedagogical questions and develop sustainable solutions for writing support.

Keywords: writing in context, academic writing, higher education, Nordic and Baltic region, writing support

1. Introduction

Academic writing is a common household term in higher education. In academia, across the globe, most of us are confronted with academic writing as students, instructors, researchers, and administrators. However, the term itself, as common as it might be, is often shrouded in a blanket of mystery, specifically for the active consumers and producers of academic writing in higher education: the students. The extent of this mystery depends on the geographic location, the language of academic writing or the educational level in which it is performed (Harbord, 2018). Despite the generally shared notion of academic writing as a practice, it is primarily those of us who work in the field of academic writing – as instructors and researchers – who grasp the full complexity of academic writing as a disciplinary field. Several scholarly disciplines and sub-disciplines are devoted to the study of academic writing from different perspectives: intercultural rhetoric, writing studies and composition and English for Academic Purposes (EAP), to name just a few. Despite this richness of theoretical knowledge, the everyday practice of teaching academic writing is usually restricted to the local context, and the instructors often find themselves having to re-invent the wheel (e.g. Björk et al., 2003; Harbord, 2010, 2018; Kruse, 2013).

2. Diverse writing concerns

Internationally, the North American higher education institutions constitute the richest and, perhaps, the most well-established contexts for academic writing: writing is a core component for learning, teaching and assessment in secondary and tertiary education curricula. This can largely be attributed to education being seen as a motor for democratisation, fostering of good citizenry and widening participation (Harbord, 2018; Ochsner & Fowler, 2004). In addition, the shared cultural, educational, and language backgrounds make standardising writing support easier. For example, the pedagogical movements such as Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) and Writing in the Discipline (WID) (Ochsner & Fowler, 2004; Thaïs & Porter, 2010) are widely accepted and adopted as models in many universities. Furthermore, university-spanning writing centres, writing programmes and courses, and writing research disciplines are familiar, even expected phenomena in higher education in North America (Harbord, 2018).

In Europe, on the other hand, traditions of writing and academic writing itself are inherently linked to different languages, educational systems, and cultural backgrounds. Due to the continuous efforts of the European Union and the Bologna Process (Kruse et al., 2016), most European countries have now developed more uniform educational systems. However, no centralised (or even decentralised) approach has been developed to how, when, or where academic writing should be taught in higher education (O'Sullivan et al., 2020). In the last decades, however, some higher education institutions in European countries adopted writing programmes comparable to those across the Atlantic. Some universities have also adopted or developed different types of pedagogical interventions, on par with WAC and WID approaches, that acknowledge the complexities of developing student writing skills over time.

3. European challenges

The biggest European challenge, however, is connecting these efforts and building a supportive community who can expertly guide the efforts to further teaching and researching writing across the diverse institutions and help share the experiences and contextualised best practice examples, across languages and contexts. More specifically, the challenge we face is building a solid body of research which influences centralised policy to back up grants and scholarships devoted to investigating the effectiveness, usefulness, and impact of current support. The European Association of the Teaching of Academic Writing (EATAW) is one such organisation: it connects likeminded instructors, researchers and other stakeholders at the biannual EATAW conference (Kramer et al., 2003). Naturally, the synergy effects of and the networking carried out in the conference often decline between the conferences. Afterall, Europe, being a centralising body, does not centralise education. Thankfully, other networks and funding opportunities within the European Union and European funding organisations, such as the Nordplus initiatives, may assist in bringing interested instructors and researchers together to continue developing collaborative actions.

For nearly 20 years, the European community has worked to meet the challenges of educational change. For writing initiatives across institutions, these changes have often been driven by policies aiming to improve the status of individual institutions of higher education (for example, by increasing their ratings) or policies aiming to improve or influence the national standards and

competitiveness, sometimes looking outwards (inviting more knowledge workers to a country) or looking inwards (strengthening national identity and language). Navigating through these complexities, researchers, instructors, and stakeholders in the writing communities have discussed writing models within the European context (Björk et al., 2003; Kramer et al., 2003). Despite these initiatives, no clear model, similar to the North American context, has emerged. In addition, the discussion of a writing support model in the European contexts has expanded to include new regions in Central and Eastern Europe and in countries which previously were not represented (such as the Baltic states and some institutions in the Nordic states), all of which bring to the table their own traditions and conceptualisations of writing.

As Björk et al. (2003) pointed out in their introduction to *Teaching Academic Writing in European Higher Education*, a great number of gaps need to be addressed even when just considering how to set up a writing programme or to determine what model to adopt with what theoretical framework within the existing facilities and programmes. While in 2003, only a few notable writing initiatives existed (for example, in Germany, Denmark, Norway and the Netherlands), now, almost 20 years later, the number of models or institutional solutions has been growing. Some of these initiatives have ceased to exist, while others have been firmly established as integral parts of universities. Yet others have been integrated into different departments, faculties, centres; for example, many university libraries have become the hubs for student and staff writing support. However, the same questions and gaps remain; in addition, due to the growing number of writing initiatives becoming visible, new questions and gaps emerge as the frictions between countries, institutions and writing initiatives become much clearer. According to Harbord (2018), some of these frictions stem from models not supporting the teaching of national languages relevant on the national contexts. Other frictions reveal universities valuing educating subject specialists rather than well-rounded citizens. Moreover, those who support student writing development are often out of synchrony with those who teach subject knowledge.

Without a centralised approach or an overall European consensus, countries and institutions are left to their own devices, and, usually, it is up to an individual or a group of colleagues who see the need to push the agenda. Such initiatives may therefore not be sustainable in the long run since they often occur without the backing of national or institutional policies. In some cases, however,

such initiatives are driven by national or institutional policies. According to Harbord (2018), such diversity may raise more questions than provide answers. Should we promote Baltic or Nordic models of writing support or Estonian or Swedish models? Should we single out a model specific for an institution within these countries? Since we know so little about the internal workings within these institutions, answering these questions with any precision may be difficult. Recent initiatives, such as the WeReLaTe Cost Action, revealed both institutional models driven by institutional policies and national models driven by national policies (O’Sullivan et al., 2020). However, left to fend for themselves, many of these models fail (for example, several writing centres have been discontinued due to universities diverting funding elsewhere). Such diversity and lack of consensus on the importance of writing support for staff and students underpin the need for sustainable networks of collegial, institutional, and national support for writing initiatives, in which research can be organised and knowledge exchanged, easily and simply through socialisation.

4. NB!Write

Inspired by EATAW and supported by Nordplus 2016-2019, the Nordic and Baltic Network for Writing in Higher Education (NB!Write) is an active and growing network bringing together instructors, researchers, and other stakeholders from higher education institutions in the Nordic and Baltic region. Currently, 15 higher educational institutions across the Nordic and Baltic States have signed up as partners in NB!Write. The rationale for this network is the more culturally and linguistically unified conditions in the region, compared to Europe at large, as well as the close geographical proximity conducive to active collaborations and the development of a sustainable incubator for writing research and practices. NB!Write specifically supports the development and integration of writing into the disciplines, including education, the arts, social sciences, humanities, and STEM across universities and higher vocational educational institutions. To enrich and inform the development of writing initiatives, NB!Write emphasises sharing the institutional and research foundations of ongoing writing practices and pedagogical interventions. By doing so, the partners tap into each other’s strengths to further develop writing that is best suited for Nordic and Baltic contexts, both in English and the national languages. The network benefits researchers, instructors, and students who use writing for teaching, learning, and measuring academic achievement and who see writing instruction as a scaffold for student success.

The main aims of NB!Write are to 1) disseminate research on writing and innovative pedagogical practices in the Nordic and Baltic region, 2) exchange practices and interventions for support and development of student writing and instructor competency and 3) share experiences and strategies to make writing initiatives and interventions visible and sustainable. The current partners in the network have developed diverse institutional systems of support for writing: writing centres, writing units, language centres and libraries, and offer courses, workshops, seminars, one-to-one tutoring, shut-up-and-write sessions to students and staff. In addition, the network pools together models for developing writing courses, integrating writing modules in disciplinary and cross-disciplinary courses, tutoring sessions, workshops on specific issues, teaching materials and curricular development. Under the NB!Write's umbrella, several partner universities have also organised well-attended open workshops, writing retreats, PhD courses and conferences. The network embraces the Humboldtian ideal of the research university (Kruse, 2006), which promotes diversity of thought and practice. In the spirit of such diversity, we aim to establish a community of scholarship, where linguistic, cultural, and institutional differences constitute the point of departure for fruitful collaborations.

In the broader European context, NB!Write directly addresses academic writing across and beyond the disciplinary discourses and audiences. Past, current, and future discussions are centred around the themes of the network's three working groups: i) Research & Development, ii) Teaching & Learning, and iii) Sustainability & Impact. As the names of the working groups suggest, we work to determine how our institutional, national, and cultural contexts may help us find possible answers to pedagogical questions and sustainable solutions for writing support. How do various national and local policies impact the conditions of writing? How do institutional models support or hinder writing across disciplines and audiences? What can the network learn from the variety of models used by partner institutions? How do questions of audience and discipline relate to concerns about the competition between the national languages and English as the preferred publication language?

5. Concluding Remarks

Thus this special issue of *Educare* collects several contributions from NB!Write partners and offers a “smorgasbord” of the research and experiences generated in the network. The publications

presented in this special issue, reflect some of the current partners' efforts to support the network's agenda (see, for example, the publications of Eriksson, Carlsson and Börjeson on integrating writing modules into disciplinary STEM courses, Jürine, et al. on mapping writing practices and research in the Baltics, and Wärnsby, Kauppinen and Finnegan on using student reflective writing as data for evidence-based curriculum development). Other publications illuminate what efforts are made in a wider European context to support networking through collaborations in COST networks (Farrell, Girgensohn & Šinkūnienė), what PhD students and other researchers need to develop their writing for publication (Etchegoyen-Rosolová & Kašpárková) and how a writing mentoring programme can offer further support (Kuntschner & Römmer-Nossek). We hope the reader finds the work described in this issue inspiring and joins the NB!Write network to promote sustainable writing initiatives in higher education.

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