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Writing higher education differently: a manifesto on style

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According to a recent survey of colleagues across the disciplines, the most effective and engaging academic writers are those who express complex ideas clearly and succinctly; write with originality, imagination and creative flair; convey enthusiasm, commitment and a strong sense of self; tap into a wide range of intellectual interests; avoid excessive jargon; employ plenty of concrete examples and illustrations; demonstrate care for their readers; and know how to tell a good story. Yet an analysis of 100 peer-reviewed articles in six top-ranked higher education journals (including 50 articles from *Studies in Higher Education*) reveals no more than a handful of academic authors who exhibit any, much less all, of those characteristics. This article offers a spirited manifesto on academic writing, arguing that educationalists have both a practical incentive and an ethical imperative to write higher education differently.

There is no satisfactory explanation of style, no infallible guide to good writing, no assurance that a person who thinks clearly will be able to write clearly, no key that unlocks the door, no inflexible rule by which the young writer may shape his course. He will often find himself steering by stars that are disturbingly in motion.
(Strunk and White 1979, 66)

Introduction: style matters

Let me tell you a story. I teach on a postgraduate certificate course attended by highly motivated 'students' – academic lecturers from across the disciplines – who are working hard at becoming better teachers. Yet, week after week, I struggle to find up-to-date educational research articles that I can assign to my class without provoking a mutiny. Books are not such a problem; in the works of Brookfield (1995), Palmer (1998) and Schön (1983), among others, we find engaging higher education research served up with humanity, humour and style. But identifying accessible journal articles about university teaching remains a constant challenge. My student-colleagues are hungry to learn, but they display an extremely low tolerance for the kind of impersonal, impenetrable prose that has become the dominant written discourse of the social sciences. They want stories, examples, ideas, solutions – not long parenthetical references, convoluted flowcharts and truckloads of educational jargon.

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Why does so much academic writing lack passion and panache, a sense of humour, a sense of style? Recently I sent out an email message to colleagues and listservs across the disciplines, posing the following two questions:

(1) How do you define 'stylish' academic writing?
(2) Who are the most stylish writers in your field, and why? That is, what makes their work a pleasure to read?

From my colleagues' responses I developed a 10-point 'academic style' scale, which I used to compare books and articles by 10 exemplary stylists – academic writers recommended by their peers as the best in the business – with 100 recently published articles from peer-reviewed journals in the field of higher education. Whereas the writers on my 'best-dressed' list all earned scores ranging from 8 to 10, the mean score for the higher education articles was 1.32, and the median score was just 0.25. In short, even when they reported on interesting and important research findings, the vast majority of the articles I analysed proved as stylistically weary, stale and flat (to quote a certain suicidal Danish prince) as a black academic gown with matching mortarboard.

My research reveals a startling gap between theory and practice: that is, between what most academics say stylish writing *is* and what educationalists actually produce and publish. To highlight this discrepancy, I will present my findings here in two contrasting versions: the first version carefully imitates conventional social science discourse, while the second version offers a more lively expansion on the same material. Whichever version you prefer – and readers' responses will inevitably be mixed, for style remains, first and foremost, a matter of individual taste – I hope you will welcome the experiment. Academic writers often assume that they have to produce a particular style of prose because peer-reviewers and editors will accept nothing else. But many journal editors *want* to push against disciplinary boundaries and reach out to a wider audience; they actively welcome articles written 'in an accessible, but rigorous, style that is likely to engage those without a specialist interest in the topic being discussed' (*Studies in Higher Education* submission guidelines). The status quo will begin to shift only when more and more academics dare to write differently, replacing impersonal research reports with real-life stories about students, teachers and researchers (human beings!) engaged in the challenging, frustrating, exhilarating work of higher education.

VERSION 1: Analysing the writing styles of recent publications in higher education journals: a quantitative study

For researchers in higher education, as in most other academic fields, publication in peer-reviewed disciplinary journals has long been recognised as a key indicator of professional performance (Atkinson-Grosjean and Grosjean 2000; Ball and Wilkinson 1994; Barry, Chandler, and Clark 2001; Dundar and Lewis 1998; Jary and Parker 1998; Jongbloed and Vossensteyn 2001; Liefner 2003; Willmott 1995). Quality assurance processes such as the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in the UK, the Performance-Based Research Fund (PBRF) in New Zealand and the increasingly competitive tenure system in the United States have established a firmly entrenched publication culture, which at once reinforces and supersedes ideals of normative disciplinary across glonacal communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991; Marginson and Rhoades 2002). Thus even highly reflective practitioners (Davis 2003; Schön 1983) are likely

to find themselves motivated to submit their most important research findings to well-established journals with high journal impact factors (JIFs), and to ensure that their work conforms to the stylistic conventions prevalent in those journals (Bollen, Rodriguez, and Van de Sompel 2006; Garfield 1998; Fassoulaki et al. 2002; Palacios-Huerta and Volij 2004; Seglen 1997). However, as the research presented in this article makes clear, there is a significant disparity between the strategies for effective, engaging writing recommended and exemplified by expert practitioners and the communication techniques currently in evidence in the top journals in the field of higher education.

Methodology

This article reports on data from a stylistic analysis of 100 recent articles from the six highest-ranking academic journals in the field of higher education (according to the ISI Web of Knowledge Journal Citation Reports for 1999–2007: http://www.isiwebofknowledge.com/). Fifty articles from the top-ranked higher education journal, *Studies in Higher Education*, were analysed, along with 10 articles from each of five other journals (see Table 1). Although 'stylish' academic writing was originally chosen as the focus of this study, it became apparent once the research project was under way that many academic writers and style guides use terms such as 'stylish', 'effective' and 'engaging' more or less interchangeably. Throughout this article, therefore, 'stylish writing' can generally be read as a synonym for 'effective writing'.

Before the data analysis began, an inventory of the formal attributes typically associated with stylish academic writing was generated via a three-stage process, which consisted of: (1) an email survey of more than 70 academics across the disciplines; (2) a collation of the principles of effective academic writing as described by the authors of six well-known style guides (Becker 1986; Elbow 1981; Lanham 1992; Strunk and White 1979; Williams 2007; Zinsser 1980); and (3) a textual analysis of the writing techniques employed in books and articles by 10 academic writers widely recognised by their peers as 'stylish' (books: Behar 1996; Clough 2002; Dawkins 1996; Garber 2001; Gardner 1967; Greenblatt 1992; Hofstadter 1979; Pinker 1999; Salmond 2003; Schama 1988; articles: Behar 2003; Clough 1996; Dawkins and Krebs 1979; Garber 2005; Gardner 1952; Greenblatt 2001; Hofstadter 1995; Pinker 1998; Salmond 2005; Schama 1980).

From the resulting style inventory (see Table 2), a shortlist of 10 attributes was extracted and specific criteria were established for each attribute. A rating of 1 ('yes'), 0.5 ('to some extent') or 0 ('no') was then assigned in response to each of the following ten questions:

Table 1.   Impact factors and rankings for the top six higher education journals.

Journal title	Impact factor (2002–2006 mean)	Impact ranking (2002–06)	No. of articles surveyed
Studies in HE	26.8	1	50
Research in HE	43.6	2	10
Journal of HE	51	3	10
Higher Education	54	4	10
Review of HE	61	5	10
Teaching in HE	82.3 (2005–06 only)	6	10

Table 2.   Stylistic attributes commonly associated with effective academic writing.

Category	Attribute
Content and language	• Complex ideas clearly expressed • Lack of jargon • Concision and precision • Accessibility • Creativity, originality, imagination • Elegance and craft • Clear structure • Tells a story • Interesting, informative title and subheadings • Engaging opening paragraph • Concrete nouns and active verbs • Interdisciplinary references • Agile use of metaphor • Visual illustrations • Verbal illustrations and examples
The author as human being	• Passion • Commitment • Intellectual engagement • An individual voice • Real-life anecdotes • Humour
Reader response	• Engages and holds the reader's attention • Gives aesthetic and/or intellectual pleasure

(1) *TITLE: Does the book or article have an interesting, concrete title?*
(2) *OPENING: Does the book or article contain an engaging opening paragraph?*
(3) *STORY: Does the book or article tell a story?*
(4) *JARGON: Is the book or article relatively jargon-free?*
(5) *VOICE: Does the author write with an individualistic voice?*
(6) *INTERDISCIPLINARITY: Does the book or article give evidence of scholarly relationships outside the author's own field?*
(7) *EXAMPLES: Does the book or article incorporate concrete examples, illustrations (not counting Excel-generated diagrams), anecdotes and/or metaphors?*
(8) *ELEGANCE AND CRAFT: Are the sentences carefully and elegantly crafted?*
(9) *VERBAL FITNESS: Does the author write clear, clean sentences that favour active verbs and concrete nouns?*
(10) *CREATIVITY, ENGAGEMENT, HUMOUR: Does the book or article strongly convey any of the following qualities: creativity, imagination, originality; passion, commitment, personal engagement; a sense of humour?*

Each book or article in the survey thus received an overall 'style rating' somewhere between 0 (i.e. none of the elements on the list was present) and 10 (i.e. all 10 elements were clearly present).

Results and discussion

The overall results of the analysis can be seen in Figure 1, which compares the 'academic style' scores of the 10 authors selected for this study as exemplars of stylish academic writing with the scores of the six top-ranked higher education journals.
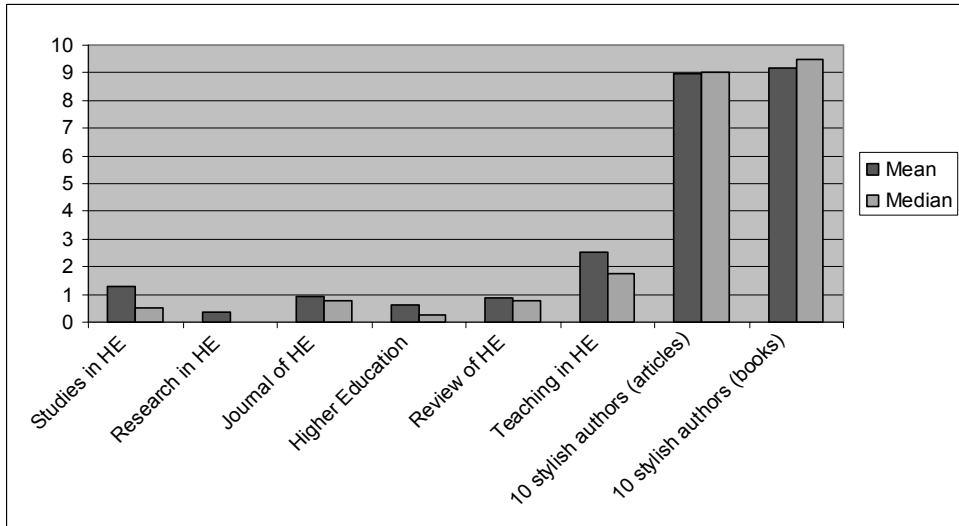
Figure 1.   Academic style ratings compared.

All 10 authors received scores of at least 8, and some as high as 10, for their work; the mean score for their books was 9.15 and the mean score for their articles was 8.95. By contrast, the 50 articles published in *Studies in Higher Education* between October 2006 and August 2007 inclusive (a total of six issues, each containing six or seven articles) averaged a mean score of 1.25 and a median score of just 0.50 (fully 42% of the articles received a rating of 0, indicating that they failed to exhibit even one of the 10 commonly identified attributes of stylish writing). Samples of 10 articles each from the other five top higher education journals yielded similar results, with mean scores ranging from 0.35 to 2.55 and median scores from 0 to 1.5.

Figure 2 shows a breakdown of the category results for the 50 articles from *Studies in Higher Education*. For each of the 10 'academic style' categories, the graph shows
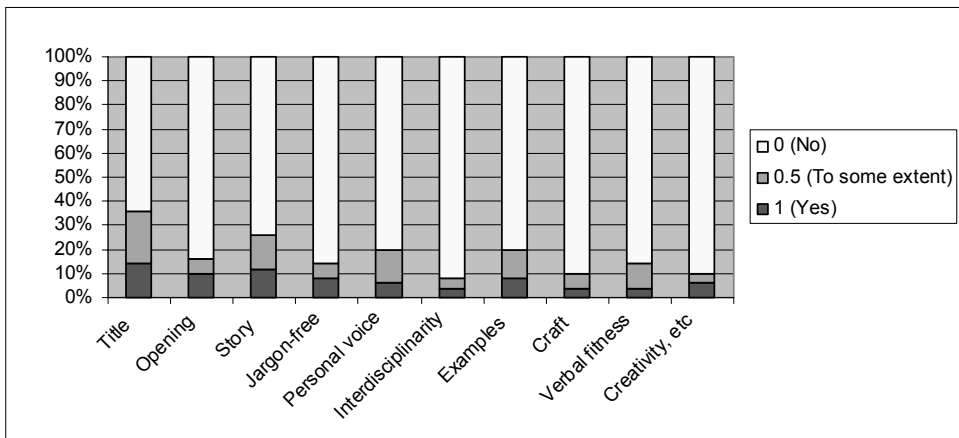

Figure 2.   Breakdown of academic style scores for *Studies in Higher Education* (50 articles, October 2006–August 2007).

the percentage of articles that received each of three possible scores (1 'yes', 0.5 'to some extent' or 0 'no'). The highest-scoring category was TITLE (*Does the book or article have an interesting, concrete title?*), for which 36% of the articles rated a positive response ('yes' or 'to some extent') and 64% rated 'no'. The lowest-scoring category was INTERDISCIPLINARITY (*Does the book or article give evidence of scholarly relationships outside the author's own field?*), for which only 8% rated 'yes' or 'to some extent' and 92% rated 'no'.

Conclusion

From these results it can be clearly observed that, even when the partially subjective nature of the 'academic style' rating scale is taken into account, there is a significant disparity between commonly recognised principles of stylish, engaging academic writing and the actual writing found in the top-rated higher education journals. Existing conventions for academic writing are, as Becker (1986), Limerick (1993), Wolff (2007), Woods (2005) and others have noted, to some extent institutionally and sociologically rather than individually determined. A Foucauldian analysis of the authoritative panoptica that regulate discursive practices in academe would, no doubt, reveal valences of power and powerlessness not readily apparent in the quantitative study undertaken here. However, such an analysis lies outside the scope of this study.

VERSION 2: Writing differently

According to my 10-point 'academic style' scale, the version of my article you have just read (Version 1) earns a score of 0. Aside from dropping in some gratuitous jargon words such as 'panoptica' and 'glonacal', I sought to produce an academic excerpt that is bland and conventional rather than blatantly satirical: an exemplary model of 'safe' academic prose. In the commentary that follows, by contrast, I have aimed to achieve a 10 on the same scale. Do keep in mind, however, that the 10 features described below – the concrete title, the catchy opening and so forth – represent stylistic *strategies* rather than hard-and-fast rules, or even guidelines. The most stylish academic writers are those who follow no fixed stars but chart their own adventurous course.

TITLE: Does the book or article have an interesting, concrete title?

A good title is like a well-chosen hat: it makes you more visible from a distance, even while serving a useful practical function. You can don a hat (or title) that is decorative but not useful, or useful but not decorative; you can even make do with no hat at all (the sartorial equivalent of a title so dull and unspecific that you might as well not have bothered). However, if you want to stand out in a crowd, why not go for a title that will be attention-getting as well as informative?

Consider these two titles from a 2006 special issue of *Studies in Higher Education* (*SiHE*), 'Transgressions and gender in higher education', devoted to transgressive feminist pedagogy:

- 'Recodifications of academic positions and reiterations of desire: change but continuity in gendered subjectivities'
- 'The breastfeeding incident: teaching and learning through transgression'

What makes the second title so much more intriguing and inviting than the first? Simple: we know that the second article will tell a story. It also helps, of course, that public breastfeeding is a 'hot button' topic about which many people have strong opinions, and that many female readers will have had personal experiences of balancing the dual roles of teacher and nursing mother, and that breasts function in our culture as titillating objects of sexual desire: indeed, the article addresses all three of these issues very astutely. But I suspect the response would be much the same if the article were called 'A tale of two teachers' or 'The tomato-throwing incident' or even 'The Kugelmass Episode' (the title of a hilarious short story by Woody Allen, in which a middle-aged humanities professor pays a magician to insert him into the plot of *Madame Bovary*, with predictably disastrous consequences). Each of these examples invokes not just a *plot* ('tale', 'incident', 'episode') but concrete *characters* or *objects* (teachers, tomatoes, Kugelmass, breastfeeding mother). A title such as 'The transgressive pedagogy incident' or 'The feminist epistemology episode' will not pique a reader's curiosity in quite the same way.

We find, alas, very few compelling titles in higher education writing. By and large, the titles of the 50 *SiHE* articles I looked at draw upon just six components, most of which are abstract rather than concrete:

(1) generic abstractions ('diversity', 'engagement');
(2) academic abstractions ('Ph.D. program', 'supervision');
(3) research abstractions ('case study', 'conceptual framework');
(4) abstract jargon words or phrases ('academicity', 'mediator effects');
(5) collective entities ('students', 'researchers', 'the university');
(6) predictable verbs, most often in '-ing' constructions ('researching', 'enhancing').

Such titles all end up sounding much the same, even when they address very different topics:

- 'Managing criticism in Ph.D. supervision: a qualitative case study'
  (*–ing academic abstraction in academic abstraction: a research abstraction*)
- 'Local responses to institutional policy: a discursive approach to positioning'
  (*Generic abstraction to academic abstraction: a research abstraction to –ing*)

What are these two articles really about? People! Yet their titles make them sound as though they report on research that took place somewhere in outer space, far away from human contact.

I recently attended a conference at which a presentation titled 'Evaluating the e-learning guidelines implementation project: formative and process evaluations' was offered at the same time as one called 'Throwing a sheep at Marshall McLuhan'. Guess which session drew the bigger audience? Needless to say, flamboyant titles can lend themselves to misuse, and thereby to ridicule and satire. But I'm not advocating modish excess here, just a bit more imaginative flair and attention to concrete language. The most effective titles, as a general rule, are those that intrigue and inform in equal measures.

Finally, a word on section headings. Of the 50 *SiHE* articles in my sample, more than 70% contained sections called 'Introduction', 'Methodology', 'Results' and 'Conclusion' (or something very similar). Some academic journals require authors to

label all their sections in a particular way; many, however, do not. Of all the things that higher education researchers can do to jazz up their academic wardrobe, donning new section titles is one of the easiest to implement.

OPENING: Does the book or article contain an engaging opening paragraph?

Not every stylish book or article starts with a punchy opening paragraph, but a striking number of them do. Effective writers know the importance of hooking a reader's attention straightaway with a story, an anecdote, an intriguing question or an appeal to human emotions. If, three pages later, you are still reading, the author has probably got you for the long haul. By contrast, nothing sinks a piece of writing more efficiently than a leaden first sentence. Yet educationalists excel at writing them:[1]

- 'Those researchers who have examined students' learning experience have usually focused on "approaches to learning" and "study orchestrations" (e.g. Meyer, 2000; Biggs, 2001; Entwistle *et al.*, 2001), and seldom integrated these constructs with others like "students' beliefs about learning and knowing" (e.g. Schommer, 1993, 1994)'.
- 'New Zealand universities have had to address a decade-long decline in proportionate funding from government accompanied by rapidly increased enrolments, escalating compliance and accountability requirements, and expanding expectations for research productivity and contributions to the knowledge economy'.

Of the 50 articles I examined from *SiHE*, only five earned a rating of 1 ('yes') in response to the question, *Does the article contain an engaging opening paragraph?*, which I defined as 'a paragraph that tells a story, sets a scenario, evokes an emotion and/or asks a question' (see Figure 2).

As for the rest of the articles in the sample, their opening sentences all fall into one of the following five categories:

(1) Announce the urgency of the topic (whether due to historical change, increasing scholarly interest and/or gaps in the current research):
  - 'A growing body of research on university teachers' approaches to teaching shows evidence of variation in the ways teachers approach their teaching'.
(2) Describe the historical and/or pedagogical situation that will be analysed:
  - 'In Italian Psychology faculties, not only graduate but also undergraduate students write a final dissertation, in which they have to review the literature on a psychological problem, i.e. synthesize and organize information from multiple sources'.
(3) Cite someone else's research or ideas:
  - 'Identity is central to any sociocultural account of learning. As far as mathematics is concerned, it is essential to students' beliefs about themselves as learners and as potential mathematicians (Kloosterman & Coughan, 1994; Carlson, 1999; Martino & Maher, 1999; Boaler & Greeno, 2000; De Corte et al., 2002; Maher, 2005), and it has vital gender, race and class components (see Becker, 1995; Burton, 1995; Bartholomew, 1999; Cooper, 2001; Dowling, 2001; Kassem, 2001; Boaler, 2002; Cobb & Hodge, 2002; Gillborn & Mirza, 2002; Nasir, 2002; De Abreu & Cline, 2003; Black, 2004)'.

(4) Describe what the article is about and/or announce its methodology:
  - 'The theoretical framework of this research is the sociocultural approach to the teaching and learning process'.
(5) Make a sweeping statement of the obvious:
  - 'Academic learning is inseparable from reading and writing'.
  - 'Writing is a central activity in higher education across disciplines'.
  - 'In academe scholarly activity is inextricably interlinked with "research"'.
  - 'Universities have the production of knowledge as core business'.

This last category reminds me of the essays I used to receive from first-year undergraduates whenever I taught W.B. Yeats' poem 'Leda and the Swan', which recounts the rape of Leda, the mother of Helen of Troy, by the Greek god Zeus in the form of a swan. Although I repeatedly urged my students to use specific imagery and details from the poem in support of their arguments, many of them could not resist starting off their papers with grand assertions about life, literature and the universe. One of my postgraduate teaching assistants parodied the tendency thus: 'Since the dawn of time, there have been women and there have been swans …'

Historians often open their articles by recounting a specific event that will prove exemplary of the period or problem they wish to explore. Literary scholars can spin webs of signification from a single starting quotation or anecdote. Popular science writers like to hone in on a fascinating fact: a creature, object or phenomenon that captures our imagination, but then leads the author into a discussion of wider issues. Such openings can, of course, become stale and predictable if used repetitively and unimaginatively. But an alert stylist will find ways of keeping the examples fresh.

Educationalists suffer no shortage of potential opening anecdotes: the teacher confronting a tricky ethical issue, the institution crippled by funding cuts, the student confused by competing intellectual agendas, the researcher struggling to resolve a methodological dilemma. Yet the stories that animate our work as teachers and scholars seldom emerge in the opening paragraphs of higher education articles, or indeed anywhere at all in our scholarship. An effective opening need not be flashy, gimmicky, or even necessarily grounded in specific people and events. Here's how Barbara Grant begins a recent *SiHE* essay about academic writing:

> Academic writing can be exhilarating, or quietly pleasurable, or plain hard work. In common with our students, it is something we – academics – must do, usually alone. Sometimes we may feel ourselves resisting the imperative to write; at other times we may experience the frustration of planning to write yet never quite getting there. So much seems to come between us and our writing. (Grant 2006, 483)

Rather than making a sweeping statement about all academic writing, Grant paints three distinct scenarios: 'Academic writing can be exhilarating, or quietly pleasurable, or plain hard work'. She subtly suggests that 'we' – the academics she explicitly addresses as her audience – can forge an emotional bond with our students through writing; for us as for them, 'it is something we must do, usually alone'. And then she vividly describes an emotion – frustration – that all academics no doubt feel from time to time, but which seldom gets an airing in educational scholarship. Will her article provide strategies for helping us to combat that frustration, or at least to understand it better? Like a good title, an engaging opening paragraph makes us want to keep reading to find out where the author will take us.

STORY: *Does the book or article tell a story?*

Needless to say, a carefully woven opening will catch no readers if, in the very next paragraph, you slacken the net and let all the fish go. Stylish writers know the importance of sustaining a *story*, with a suspenseful plot and well-defined characters, rather than merely sprinkling isolated anecdotes throughout an otherwise sagging narrative. As Jonathan Wolff notes in a humorous-yet-serious 2007 *Guardian* essay titled 'Literary boredom':

> Good writing captures its reader by means of creating a tension between the plot and the story. The reader is shown enough of the narrative sequence to get an impression of what is going on, and to whet their appetite for more, but much is hidden. Suspense is created, and the reader is hooked until it is resolved. But … in my subject, we teach students to go sub-zero on the tension scale: to give the game away right from the start. A detective novel written by a good philosophy student would begin: 'In this novel I shall show that the butler did it'. (Wolff 2007)

An article that offers no suspense, no narrative arc, no sense of moving from A to B, will not hold the reader's attention nearly as effectively as an article plotted, even at the most subtle level, like a good thriller (What will happen next?), or a mystery novel (What clues will the intrepid researcher/detective unearth?), or a Bildungsroman (What lessons will the protagonist learn along the way, and from whom?), or yes, even a fairytale or epic poem (Will good triumph over evil? Will the bad witch of administrative incompetence poison the idealistic young teacher's apple? Will we all live happily ever after, or do new challenges lurk on the horizon?)

Of course, a story needs characters as well as a plot. Educational research abounds in human characters: students, teachers, administrators, even researchers (that is, ourselves). Sometimes all we need to do is look for the people already lurking in the sidelines of our articles – the students we have taught, the teachers we have interviewed – and build our larger arguments around a few exemplary anecdotes. A skilful writer can even construct a compelling narrative whose main 'character' is an institution (how did the University of X respond to the government's new funding regime?), or an abstract entity such as peer assessment (what happens to the quality of undergraduate student essays in a class where peer assessment is introduced as a marking strategy?). But those narratives become far more powerful and persuasive when we remember to weave in individual stories about, for example, the *employees* at the University of X or the *students* who wrote the essays.

Every research article I have ever read contains the germ of a good story. Yet only six of the 50 *SiHE* articles in my sample earned an unambiguous 'yes' in response to the question, 'Does the article tell a story?', and only seven earned ratings of 'to some extent' (see Figure 2). The remaining 74% of the articles in the survey sample swathe their case studies, research reports and transformation narratives in so many layers of abstract, impersonal language that potential plots and characters get lost. For those of us who care about stylish academic writing, that statistic tells a shocking story.

JARGON: *Is the book or article relatively jargon-free?*

Jargon is the badge we flash to assure our colleagues of our intellectual credentials. I still remember the moment when, as a PhD student in Comparative Literature, I spontaneously yoked the words 'epistemology' and 'ontology' together in a single

sentence. With pleasure and pride, I realised that I had finally passed through the Pearly Gates of professional competence (or *normative disciplinarity*, as I might have called it then).

Many thoughtful and eloquent academics have defended the use of jargon in appropriate contexts. As literary scholar Marjorie Garber explains:

> Jargon marks the place where thinking has been. It becomes a kind of macro, to use a computer term: a way of storing a complicated sequence of thinking operations under a unique name. (Garber 2001, 144)

Note, however, how, in her defence of jargon, Garber herself scrupulously avoids using it, at least in the casual way of most academics. Instead, she offers us an illustrative metaphor ('jargon is like a computer macro') that carefully incorporates a clear, precise definition of the specialist word 'macro'.

The crucial question for academic writers, Garber argues, is not how to avoid jargon altogether, 'but how to keep language at once *precise* and *rich*' (Garber 2001, 119; my emphasis). Some 86% of the *SiHE* articles I analysed contained several instances of undefined academic jargon (i.e. 'any word or phrase that an educated reader in a different discipline might reasonably need to have defined in order to fully understand the author's meaning') within the first thousand words (see Figure 2). For example:

- 'This article seeks to address this *lacuna* and applies the *interactionist concept of "identity work"* in order to examine one specific group to date under-researched: graduate research administrators'.
- 'The effects of the students' participation in the *CSCL environment* are described in terms of their development of *affective, cognitive and metacognitive learning processes*'.

Do these sentences illustrate, in Garber's words, a *precise* use of language? Well, yes and no. Phrases such as 'constructivist approach' and 'affective, cognitive and meta-cognitive learning processes' make sense to anyone already familiar with them – including, most likely, the majority of *SiHE* readers – and thus save time and effort on both sides. At the same time, however, they also erect a barrier that warns non-specialist readers to 'Keep Out'. Thus, even if these phrases can be called *precise*, the effect of that precision cuts both ways.

And are they *rich*? To my ear, no; in my own quest for academic elegance, I have come to dislike words that end in repetitive suffixes such as *–ist* and *–ive*, which sound to me like a country parson coughing. 'Lacuna', on the other hand, is a beautiful, lilting word; but in an otherwise prosaic article about graduate research administrators, it jars rather than illuminates. 'Lacuna' is what sociologist Howard Becker (1986) disapprovingly calls a 'classy' word, chosen by an author who has adopted the intellectual persona of someone too refined and cerebral to use the simple word 'gap'.

VOICE: *Does the author write with an individualistic voice?*

The days are long past when scientists and social scientists were absolutely forbidden to use the word 'I' in their academic publications. Yet most of the *SiHE* articles I surveyed avoided using first-person pronouns altogether, and the remainder, by and

large, used 'I' or 'we' sparingly and impersonally. Only 14% earned 'to some extent' in response to the question, 'Does the author write with an individualistic voice?', and only 6% rated an unambiguous 'Yes' (see Figure 2). Apparently the old myth that Impersonal = Objective = Scientifically Superior still holds firm in many social scientists' minds.

Needless to say, academic writers do not necessarily *have* to communicate a strong sense of self in order to produce stylish and engaging prose. All the same, I cannot help noting how many of the authors on my 'stylish academics' list (Dawkins, Garber, Hofstadter et al.) do indeed choose to write in a personal, individualistic mode, even when they are addressing a specialised rather than general audience. We feel as though they are chatting with us over a cup of coffee, perhaps sketching diagrams on a napkin to illustrate a point, rather than reading lifeless prose off a computer printout or PowerPoint screen. Readers frequently praise these authors for conveying passion, personal commitment and engagement in their writing – qualities that are difficult to communicate without at least occasional recourse to the first-person mode.

While I'm on the subject of authorial voice, it's time for me to make a confession. When I first embarked on this project, I chose as my study sample the 50 most recently published articles in *SiHE* as of October 2007. The first 40 articles yielded a mean score of just 0.7 on my 'academic style' scale and a median score of 0.25. However, the last 10 examples I looked at included the seven articles in the transgressive feminist pedagogy issue of 2006, to which I have already briefly alluded. Those seven articles, although they represented only 14% of my total *SiHE* sample, ended up skewing the final results so significantly upward that (here comes the confession) I was sorely tempted to remove them from the sample altogether. Figure 3 compares the mean score for the feminist pedagogy issue (5.1) with the mean scores of the first six issues in my 'official' sample (which range from 0.3 to 1.2); and Figure 4 (which can be usefully compared with Figure 2) breaks down the individual category scores of the seven articles. Note the high scores for 'catchy title', 'engaging opening', 'story' and especially 'individualistic voice'.
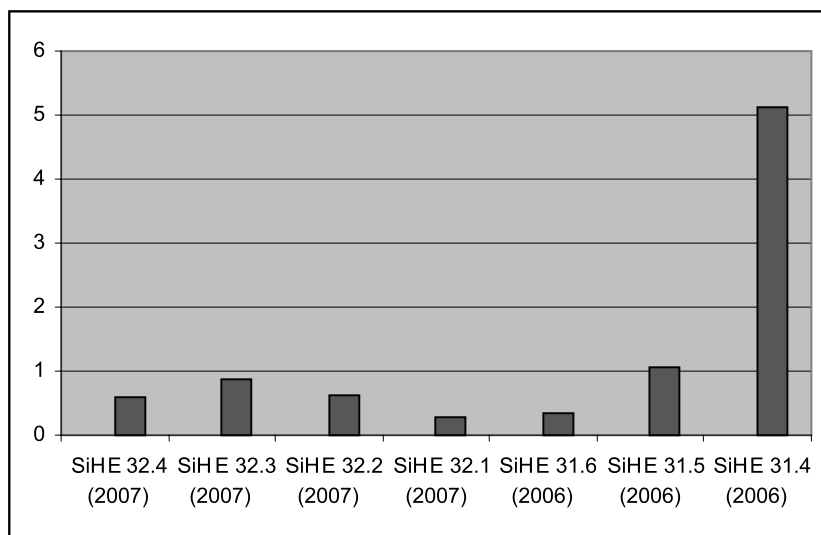

Figure 3.   Mean academic style ratings for *Studies in Higher Education* (seven issues, 6–7 articles per issue).
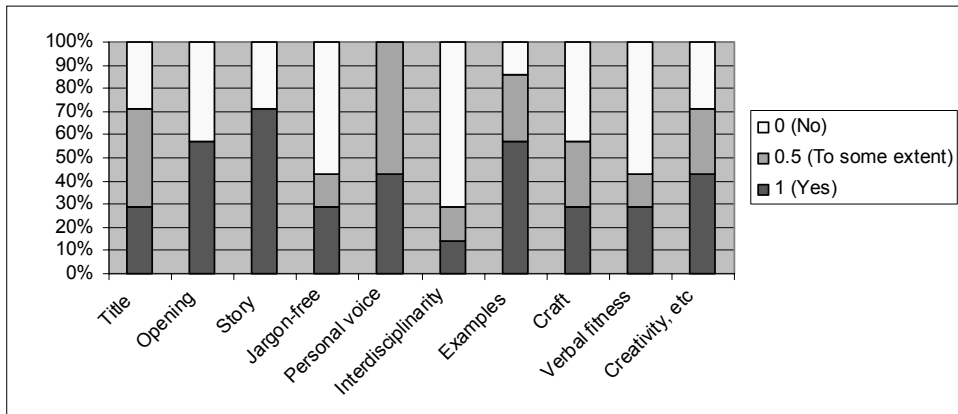
Figure 4.   Breakdown of academic style scores for the *Studies in Higher Education* feminist pedagogy issue (seven articles).

Are feminist educationalists inherently more stylish writers than their peers? I doubt it; indeed, I could cite many examples of turgid, jargon-heavy, deeply unengaging feminist scholarship. But the articles in this particular issue tend to draw upon the personal experiences of their authors; they tell specific stories about real people; they communicate a sense of professional passion and political engagement; and, crucially, they *all* use the word 'I' or 'we'. The stylishness of the articles, in other words, flows from the authors' personal investment in their subject matter and their willingness to put themselves on the line – literally – in their academic prose.

INTERDISCIPLINARITY: Does the book or article show evidence of scholarly relationships outside the author's own field?

Evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins opens his book *Climbing Mount Improbable* with an account of a literary lecture on figs. Psychologist Robert Sternberg opens *Cupid's arrow: the course of love through time* with a Greek myth. Literary critic Marjorie Garber opens *Academic instincts* with an anecdote about the election of Jesse 'The Body' Ventura as Governor of Minnesota. Psycholinguist Michael Corballis opens *From hand to mouth: the origins of language* with a poem about magpies. Anthropologist Ruth Behar opens *The vulnerable observer: anthropology that breaks your heart* with a meditation on a short story by Isabel Allende (Dawkins 1996; Sternberg 1998; Garber 2001; Corballis 2002; Behar 1996). What do all of these eminently stylish scholars have in common? They exhibit – not just in their opening paragraphs, but throughout their books and their scholarly work in general – a wide-ranging interest in cultural and intellectual arenas beyond their own disciplines.

Of the 50 *SiHE* articles I analysed, only 6% (see Figure 2) made references to books, events or ideas outside the discipline of higher education (not counting the work of cultural historians such as Foucault, Habermas or Bourdieu, whose work has entered the educationalist canon). Do educationalists have no interest in the wider world? Do we believe that good research scholarship, like a blinkered carthorse, never glances to the right or left? Perhaps, in the course of our disciplinary training, we have been disciplined into too much intellectual meekness: by teachers who have admonished us to 'stick to the subject'; by colleagues who have stuck their heads in

the sand and invited us to join them there. Stylish writers know the value of interesting examples and illustrations, and they delight in finding those illustrations everywhere around them.

EXAMPLES: *Does the book or article incorporate concrete examples, illustrations (not counting Excel-generated diagrams), anecdotes and/or metaphors?*

All of the stylish writers whose work I analysed use concrete illustrations of one kind or another in their academic writing: metaphors, anecdotes, examples and/or visual materials (beyond the usual charts, graphs and flowcharts, which can sometimes be even more difficult to understand than standard academic prose!) Anecdotes and illustrations can serve a variety of purposes: explaining abstract concepts in concrete terms; providing extra detail; reinforcing a point; capturing the reader's attention; or simply varying the pace of the prose. Metaphor, likewise, offers fresh ways – some understated, others about as subtle as a sledgehammer – of viewing a situation or idea.

Many academic writers, particularly in the sciences and social sciences, view 'literary' devices such as metaphor with suspicion. But we cannot avoid metaphor entirely, even if we try. Indeed, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (2003) argue that *all* language is deeply metaphorical. Even seemingly abstract statements nearly always have a metaphorical thrust, as these two examples from recent *SiHE* articles illustrate:

- 'As an institution, education holds both the power to reproduce and the promise to transgress social relations'.
- 'Employability issues are at the very core of contemporary higher education in the UK'.

The first excerpt personifies 'education' as a quasi-conscious entity that 'holds power' both to 'reproduce' and 'transgress' social relations, rather like a woman torn between conventional domesticity and an extramarital affair. The second excerpt figures 'contemporary higher education' as an apple (or similar object) that has 'employability issues' at its 'core' – whether in the role of life-perpetuating seeds or life-destroying worm, we are not told. Academic writers frequently use potent concrete metaphors such as 'reproduce' and 'core' without thinking about them, reaching for stale images and clichés rather than the fresh, vivid language that typifies stylish writing.

ELEGANCE AND CRAFT: *Are the sentences carefully and elegantly crafted?*

A carefully crafted sentence welcomes its reader, like a comfortable rocking chair; bears its reader across chasms, like a suspension bridge; helps its reader navigate tricky terrain, like a well-hewn walking stick. A poorly-crafted or uncrafted sentence, on the other hand, functions more like a shapeless log tossed into a river: it might or might not help you get to the other side, depending on how strong the current is and how hard you are willing to kick. And some writers make us kick very hard indeed.

Here is one of the bumpier logs I found floating in the rivers of *SiHE*:

- 'These deconstructive and theorising inputs to the conversation are less about finding out how to better (i.e. more effectively) succumb to neo-liberal or

economic rationalist discourses of effectiveness and completion, and more about critically exploring, for example, how those discourses may be operative and regulatory, what they make possible and impossible, and how they compete with other available discourses about the course and purpose of postgraduate research and supervision'.

I used to wonder why academics write such rambling, bulky sentences when they could produce lean, energetic ones instead. Only while working on the first version of this article – writing in a deliberately unstylish mode, and never opting for a short, active phrase where a long, unwieldy one would do – did I finally discover the answer. Allow me to let you in on my epiphany, italicised for extra emphasis: *bland, strung-out, abstract sentences are much, much easier to write than tight, active, concrete ones!!* It's Newton's Second Law of Thermodynamics in action.

For a short while, I actually even fantasised about abandoning my whole idealistic 'let's improve the state of academic writing' project, and instead churning out a series of research reports in paint-by-numbers mode at thrice my usual production speed – a canny scheme for an ambitious academic, perhaps, but one I could never have squared with either my aesthetic sensibilities or my ethical conscience. Stylish prose favours the reader, whereas stodgy prose favours the writer. In an academic universe where salaries and careers depend on productivity rates, it can be tempting for us all to write, write, write as quickly as we can, without additional editing or polishing – especially when journals are willing to publish the results. But aren't universities supposed to be about education and innovation and responsibility and collegial exchange and pushing the boundaries of the possible? And isn't it ironic that I should find myself touting the old-fashioned value of 'craft' as a radical academic undertaking?

VERBAL FITNESS: Does the author write clear, clean sentences that favour active verbs and concrete nouns?

In a recent book called *The writer's diet* (Sword 2007), I introduced 'The Wasteline Test', a diagnostic exercise that helps academic writers distinguish between 'fit' and 'flabby' prose. The test measures a writer's use of words in each of five grammatical categories – verbs, nouns, prepositions, adjectives/adverbs and 'waste words' (*it, this, that, there*) – and assigns one of the following Verbal Fitness Ratings for each category: 'Lean', 'Fit and trim', 'Needs toning', 'Flabby' or 'Heart attack territory'. In a nutshell, 'Fit and trim' or 'Lean' prose contains plenty of active verbs and concrete nouns, avoiding unbridled use of *be* verbs (e.g. *is*, *was*, *were*), prepositional phrases, adjectives/adverbs and 'waste words'.

The Wasteline Test offers a diagnosis, not a prescription; a heuristic, not an emetic. Stylish writers who deploy a range of verbal techniques and embellishments will almost invariably stray below the 'Fit and trim' range from time to time. All the same, it's worth noting that the 10 stylish academics on my 'best-dressed' list generally score very well on the Wasteline Test (rating 'Lean' or 'Fit and trim' in most if not all categories), whereas other academic writers, on average, do not. The test offers one quick way – certainly not the only way – of pinpointing *why* a particular piece of writing feels so muddy and unfocused. Prose identified by the Wasteline Test as fit will not necessarily be stylish; but flabby prose has almost no chance at all (for more on *The writer's diet*, and to try out the Wasteline Test yourself, visit www.writersdiet.ac.nz).

CREATIVITY, ENGAGEMENT, HUMOUR: Does the book or article strongly convey any or all of the following qualities: creativity, imagination, originality; passion, commitment, personal engagement; a sense of humour?

The academic world pays frequent lip service to creative and critical thinking, but provides us with few models for merging the two (for some suggestions on facilitating creative/critical interchanges in student writing, see Brodkey 1996; Elbow 1981; Pope 1995). I take it as a given that virtually *all* articles published in *Studies in Higher Education* and other top educational journals report on new, and therefore by definition 'original', research. Moreover, I have little doubt that most of their authors undertook that research with commitment, personal engagement and, yes, perhaps even a sense of humour. However, my final survey question is not, '*Is* the author a creative and committed scholar?' but 'Does the article *strongly convey* … creativity, imagination, originality; passion, commitment, personal engagement; a sense of humour?' Only five of the 50 *SiHE* articles I analysed earned an answer of 'yes' or 'to some extent' – and, you guessed it, all five of them were in the feminist pedagogy issue.

Try asking yourself the same question about your own most recent piece of writing: Does it *convey to readers* the creativity, commitment and engagement that you put into your research and writing? If your honest response is 'no', perhaps your next question should be 'Why not?', followed by 'Then how …?'

Conclusion: re-dressing academic writing

Writing differently can be risky – a fact of which I have become keenly aware while working on this article *about* writing differently. Readers' responses have ranged from caveat-inflected praise ('It's sad that some readers will see this paper as provocative when it is simply advocating a straightforward and engaging style for academic writing') to outright displeasure ('Practically, what you are suggesting is even more work for a group of people – i.e. academics – who protest already that they have barely enough time to do research, let alone write. And now they have to write stylishly as well!') These mixed reactions have reminded me that energetic, engaged prose fosters energetic, engaged reading, for better or for worse. And who among us can afford to watch our unconventionally dressed research article, with its funky cowboy boots and purple hair, get rejected by a major peer-reviewed journal when we know that its sensibly shod, short-top-and-sides sibling would have been a shoo-in?

If we want to remain intellectually alive, however, we *must* take such risks from time to time. Scholars of higher education in particular – a field in which many people work but relatively few undertake research – have an ethical, aesthetic and pedagogical imperative to communicate their work effectively to those who dwell outside our own intellectual hothouse. And we will not succeed in engaging new audiences (or, for that matter, in reinvigorating existing ones) unless we re-dress our academic prose. How? By emulating the most effective academic writers rather than the most conventional ones; by working hard to catch a reader's eye, to weave a vivid story, to accessorise a beige narrative with brighter colours; and by proving wrong the naysayers who warn that top academic journals will accept nothing but cookie-cutter prose. We owe it to our colleagues, our students, our institutions and, yes, to ourselves to write as the most effective teachers teach: with passion, with craft, with care and with style.

Note

1. All unreferenced quotations in this article come from the following issues of *SiHE*: 31.4, 31.5, 31.6, 32.1, 32.2, 32.3 and 32.4.

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