

## Decolonising Academic Writing Book Review

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### Book

*Supporting Student Writing and Other Modes of Learning and Assessment. A Staff Guide* by Sandra Abegglen, Tom Burns and Sandra Sinfield - illustrated by Veronica Piras, undergraduate student in the School of Art, Architecture and Design at London Metropolitan University - 2021, PRISM. Freely available at: <https://prism.ucalgary.ca/handle/1880/113457>

### Introduction

This short article reviews the book *Supporting Student Writing and Other Modes of Learning and Assessment. A Staff Guide* (2021) incorporating author and reviewer voices. A synopsis of the work is provided, together with recommendations of how the book might be used to decolonise academic writing.

### Synopsis

The Staff Guide *Supporting Student Writing and Other Modes of Learning and Assessment* promotes writing-to-learn. Academic writing is a contested area that is tricky to navigate and master especially for 'newcomers' and 'outsiders.' However, this does not need to be the case. The Guide shows that if instructors 'teach' writing differently, it can foster students' learning. Academic writing is a process: we write to explore, to discover what we think, and we write to become academic. Academic writing is an initiation into and participation in wider professional and academic discourses. The Guide is an invitation for educators to move beyond the 'mechanics' of writing - to make it meaningful, engaging, inclusive, interactive and fun. If writing is appreciated as developmental - and appropriately supported - it automatically spurs students on to write their 'best.' It also helps challenge colonised academic space where the single, white male author is dominant. As such, the Guide promotes writing for social justice - writing that is inclusive and makes a difference.

## Author comment

*Supporting Student Writing* has been developed following and in response to a Writing Workshop that we - Sandra A, Tom and Sandra S - delivered at a Learning and Teaching Conference held at LondonMet. The workshop revealed not only that students struggle with writing but also that instructors despite their best intentions often struggle with 'teaching writing' meaningfully. Thus, in this Guide, we provide ideas about how to 'teach' academic writing. We outline a variety of writing and pre-writing activities, and a range of approaches, strategies and workshops, all of which have been designed to promote students' understanding of the 'point' of writing. We also outline activities that foster writing habits, including strategies to de-construct any assessment task that students might face: from the essay to the multimodal digital artefact.

For many in academia formal academic writing is still the place that they feel most uncomfortable, most unwelcome - and most like an academic 'outsider.' The Guide is designed to help staff and students break down the fear of the written assignment in playful, creative and very practical ways. Our goal is not to 'dumb down' but to raise the challenge and the level of difficulty of the tasks that we set students, whilst making those tasks more inviting, exploratory and interesting. Building a 'write to learn' culture, 'frees' students to engage with what they are learning - it creates an inclusive assessment space that 'lets them in' and that legitimises their identities and their explorations. This is at the very heart of an Education for Social Justice: welcoming our students into the academy - making their experiences and voices heard and, by creative and empowering strategies, helping them to succeed in academia not by fitting into a pre-set, predetermined mould - but by finding their space and place - becoming academic more on their own terms. It is decolonising academic space and teaching for social justice.

## Review: Debbie Holley, Professor of Learning Innovation, Faculty of Health and Social Science, Bournemouth University

A hotly contested debate in Higher Education remains: where does the responsibility lie for the development of student writing? How clearly these inspirational authors place this responsibility with us – in our classrooms, labs, online spaces, tutorials, one-to-ones, large groups, small groups. Wherever our students are learning, they are writing, be it formatively, creatively, or summatively, often with pain, pressure and little support, but seldom for pleasure. If we are to actively engage our students with their learning, it has to be where they learn, not 'over there' to be fixed by a skills team, however dedicated, but within the framework of true emancipatory practice, where their writing frees them to articulate their authentic voice.

Creative pedagogies have a huge part to play in offering a different lens; as does the decolonisation of curricula practices. As educators in positions of power and authority, no matter how 'nice' we are, we still grade their work; it is for us to frame their efforts within a wider social justice platform, giving a voice to all of the students in our care, not just the privileged ones. This Guide, with its wonderful fluidity, design and colour offers us the tools and techniques to weave into our practice, whether we are anthropologists, sociologists, business professionals, designers or engineers. Enabling writing across the disciplines, the examples, resources and activities in this Guide lift off the pages to inspire, encourage and embolden us to embed writing as a practice in each and every context.

## Author recommendations

Given students' resistance to and fear of writing, we have to 'convince' students that they can surface their thinking through the written word and that they are allowed to 'speak.' This is in opposition to the subliminal idea that you can only write what you already know and that there is only one 'right' answer. We want to build students' confidence in their voice. The Guide offers ideas, examples and activities of how instructors might support student writing - to decolonise a contested academic area.

Note: The list of examples and approaches provided in *Supporting Student Writing* is not exhaustive or finite. Especially in these uncertain times, new ways of learning and teaching emerge, together with new software and web-based resources that are useful for students and instructors. Please feel free to share your ideas and resources with us via email or social media (Twitter).

## References

Abegglen, S., Burns, T. & Sinfield, S. (2021), *Supporting Student Writing and Other Modes of Learning and Assessment: A Staff Guide*. Calgary: PRISM. Available at: <https://prism.ucalgary.ca/handle/1880/113457>

## Biographical note

Sandra Sinfield, Sandra Abegglen and Tom Burns have worked and taught together at LondonMet for many years. Sandra A left London Met in 2018 and is now based at the University of Calgary (Canada) where she works on research projects that look at design studio practice. Sandra S and Tom B teach on the PGcert and MALTH courses for academic staff, with a special focus on praxes that ignite curiosity, harness creativity, and develop power and voice. They have co-authored *Teaching, Learning and Study Skills: a guide for tutors* and *Essential Study Skills: the complete guide to success at university* (5<sup>th</sup> Edition forthcoming), two books that support academic learning and teaching across disciplines.

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