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# Re-situating Workplace Writing:
# Identity, Power, and Academic Support Staff

As a secretary and a doctoral student at GSE, I am in the peculiar position of existing between and within two very different worlds in academia. On the one hand, I am a part of a community of academic support staff whose job is essentially to make the School run by providing administrative support for students and faculty, shaping the School's public image, and organizing School-wide events. On the other hand, as a doctoral student, I am the perceived intellectual offspring of GSE's faculty, ideally next in line to become a researcher/practitioner in education and presumably to one day reap the benefits of tenure and publishing stardom. Despite the seemingly stark differences between these two positions, I don't really view academia differently depending on which desk I'm sitting at. Rather, I find that the work I do (including reading, writing, researching, talking) in each position informs and shapes the work I do in the other.

In many ways, we (academic support staff) write for much more public audiences than do the faculty, not just in terms of discourse communities, but also in terms of the wide range of diverse people who are likely to read our writing – for example, we write bios; we write public emails and advertisements for lectures, job talks, events; we also write correspondence, web text, and other public texts to represent our particular departments and sometimes, the School. Because our work often involves knowledge of the work faculty do, many of us are relatively well versed on faculty research and writing.

Thinking about the types of writing that we do in the academy, I wonder how this writing is viewed and where its writers are situated. Do most academic support staff consider our writing academic? Do we situate ourselves within the academy? Given that so much of our work involves writing, do we consider ourselves writers? Plus, what counts as "writing" and what counts as "academic?"[1]

## Research on Workplace Writing

Looking at research on workplace writing (especially as it relates to identity and power) in fields as varied as education, communication, business, and sociology, I found three main ways of talking about workplace writing: technical writing and approaches to preparing students for this kind of writing; email culture, Internet abuse, and work ethics; and writing demands placed on workers and issues of power in the workplace.

What I found most intriguing in reading literature on workplace writing was the variety writing genres discussed (from email requests to medical reports to business reports) and the ways article writers situate themselves in their discussions. Much of what this research is written by outsiders who study writers in the field or teachers talking about ways to better prepare students. For example, Spigelman and Grobman (2006) write as business writing teachers with composition backgrounds and use composition/rhetoric theory to make revisions to business writing curriculum.[2] This is particularly interesting because of how it situates writing expertise. Why do composition

[1] In "Workplace learning in academia: (Older) bones of contention," Gelade, S. (2007) discusses academic debates over "what counts" as academic work at her Australian university. Her article emphasizes the need for academic faculty and staff to do professional development work that they often consider "not academic work." For them, true academic work focuses on research and publication, rather than on teaching and administrative duties.

[2] Spigelman, C. & Grobman, L. (2008). "Why we chose rhetoric: Necessity, ethics, and the (re)making of a professional writing program.

teachers teach business students about writing for the field? Shouldn't business writers be doing this teaching? Questioning my own decision to talk to academic support staff about their writing, I know that I might not be interested in this work were I not a doctoral student interested in writing, power, and identity. Still, what makes my colleagues and me experts in this genre of writing is that we do it every day. It is my dual identity as an academic support staff member and a student that shapes my lens and informs my interest in how academic support staff are situated in the writing we do at work and, more specifically, in the space of academia.

Generally, though, most of the literature focuses on skills-based preparation for workplace writing tasks, rather than the ways writers perceive their writing work and situate themselves in work spaces. Even research that touches on power in workplace writing looks at power from a rhetorical space rather than a social space. For example, Richardson and Liggett (1993) write as insiders and aim to use their research to focus on institutionalized power structures that enforce certain styles of writing.[3] However, they focus on the institutionalized forms that guide the writers in the writing of reports and other work texts, rather than the ways that workers perceive systemic power structures.

A few writers use descriptions of workplace and professional writing as socially influenced, communicative genres and talk about literacy as social practice and hence, of workplace writing as embedded in workers' experiences and knowledge, rather than in the expectations of or rules dictated by higher-ups in an organization. As Yu (2008) asserts, "…technical writing genres are not static formats, but rhetorically shaped, locally controlled, and socially constituted kindred responses to recurrent communication situations. Thus, to teach workplace writing is not to have students memorize formats,

[3] Richardson, M. & Liggett, S. (1993). "Power relations, technical writing theory, and workplace writing."

but to teach them how to approach, assess, and resolve workplace communication problems in context through writing… as the context may demand."[4] Karlsson (2009), too, explains that "work knowledge must be studied from the perspective of the work activity," i.e. that it should be situated in what workers do and how they perceive their work.[5] This talk of writing as a social practice informs my focus on the relationships between power, identity, and writing in the academic workplace. Rather than talk with texts produced by academic support staff, I want to talk specifically with the writers about how they perceive the writing they do. If writing is a social practice, how do power structures in the academy influence the ways academic support staff write in this space and how they view themselves as the ones doing the writing?

Interviewing my Co-Workers

I decided to ask some co-workers if I could interview them about the kinds of writing they do at work and about how they feel about that work in hopes of finding ways of talking about ownership of writing, collaborative writing, writing rules, and writing to represent others. I initially asked ten co-workers (all members of GSE's academic support staff) if they were interested in being interviewed; I chose them because they are people I'm friendly with at work and because they work in a variety of different offices and positions and hence, are responsible for a diverse body of writing. One declined to participate and nine agreed. However, I only interviewed six co-workers for this paper;

[4] Yu, H. (2008). "Contextualize technical writing assessment to better prepare students for workplace writing: Student-centered assessment instruments." p. 269.
[5] Karlsson, A. (2009). "Positioned by reading and writing: Literacy practices, roles, and genres in common occupations." p. 54.

out of the other three, one did not respond to my emails about setting up a meeting time and I was unable to interview the other two because of time constraints.

In introducing the topic to the interviewees, I described three main interests: the intersection of academic hierarchies and academic support staff's writing identities; the relationships academic support staff (and their higher ups, i.e., those they report to) have with the writing they do at work; and the rules that go along with public and digital writing. All six interviewees were interested in helping me with this work and generally, they brought their own ideas and opinions about workplace writing into our conversations. I met each interviewee individually and asked if I could tape record them. I also assured each interviewee that I would keep their names and information confidential and gave them details about the class I'd be writing this paper for.

In the interviews, I began by asking interviewees to describe the writing they do for work. I often asked follow-up questions such as, "do you do a lot of emailing for your job," "has the kind of writing and correspondence you do for work changed since you began working here and can you tell me about that," "how does this writing make you feel," "can you describe that in more detail," "how do you feel about that?" I also asked questions like, "given all the writing you describe, do you consider yourself a writer," and questions about rules that go along with modes of writing (such as email or writing letters for others' signature, etc). For the most part, interviewees were very specific about rules related to modes of writing and I later wondered if it may have been useful to look at writing with interviewees and record their further analyses of those texts. Bremner (2006), who studies email politeness and power structures, begins by studying email writing, with a lens informed by multiple politeness theories, and later interviews

the email writers as follow-up on his own analyses.[6] However, since I am more interested in writer identity as it relates to academic hierarchies, I am inclined to focus on writers' identities and their own descriptions of their writing practices and of power hierarchies, rather than to focus on texts or use texts as key indicators of writers' identities.[7]

As I express in my introduction, I am very aware of the power structures present in the academy because I exist in multiple spaces within those structures. Generally, I am most aware of these power structures when my positions intersect, for example, when I host an event as a staff member and students I go to school with attend the event. Academic support staff seem very comfortable with my dual role at GSE, I think, because many staff members take courses at Penn and taking courses is a normative practice here. Most staff, especially those that I am friendly with, are very supportive and encouraging of my being in school and a few staff members often advise me, act as mentors, or help me to understand policies and documents when I need help. In this way, my insider positioning privileges me over other students in terms of my access to support. Working in higher education also privileges me because I have access to understanding the inner workings of the academy, which informs my research, as well as my student practices.[8]

With this in mind, I approached this project not as an outside researcher stepping into a foreign world, but rather as an insider inquiring into my own practices and the practices of my peers in our shared space. I can't know how those I interviewed perceive

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[6] Bremner, St. (2006). "Politeness, power, and activity systems: Written requests and multiple audiences in an institutional setting."

[7] As I say in more detail later, I would like to do more email-writing-related work with academic support staff and look at texts (both emails written at work and research by others) with staff as part of our ongoing conversations about work writing.

[8] I'm not sure how students and faculty perceive my dual role. I haven't given this a lot of thought, mostly because my staff position doesn't require that I interact too much with students and because most of the faculty with whom I interact as a staff member don't seem to be aware that I'm also a doctoral student.

me or the work I'm doing, but I assumed a generally equal relationship because most of the staff I interviewed are people I talk to on a regular basis, people who advise me on both school and life matters, and people who have worked in academia much longer than I have and hence, who are knowledgeable on the world and practices of academia, to which I am a relative novice. Still, I imagine that the interviewees were conscious of our relative positionings – me as interviewer and they as interviewees. My staff identity definitely overpowered my student/interviewer identity, so much so that I found it difficult to ask certain questions (like straightforward questions about power hierarchies) to interviewees that I don't know very well. I hope that as I conduct future interviews, I can break through some of these barriers.

While all names and information have been kept confidential, I have invited all the interviewees to participate in the writing of this piece, either by giving feedback on drafts or acting as and being named as co-writers, if they choose. At least four of the six interviewees expressed interest in reading the paper or offering feedback. In planning this paper, I wanted to interview my coworkers because of my interest in their own conceptions of power, identity, and writing in the workplace, but I wasn't really sure what work it would do in the world.[9] Now, I wonder if this paper might be a preliminary step towards at least three projects: the first is more/ongoing conversations with academic support staff about the writing we do and ways that administration can support our writing and writer selves, work that can maybe lead to papers, presentations, or some contributions to literature on workplace writing and identity; the second is the design of staff professional development that focuses on both customer service and email etiquette,

[9] This question of "what work does it do in the world" has been asked in multiple contexts in our class and I was reminded of it by members of my writing group who wondered how this work might inform the ways academic support staff do writing, or the kinds of writing we are asked to do, in the workplace.

both of which were addressed by interviewees; the third is the implementation of an informal writing group at GSE where staff members might do personal, identity work to further explore their positionings in the academy.

## Workplace Writing at GSE: Conversations with Support Staff

### Ownership and Collaboration

*Ghostwriting.* Prior to beginning this project, an interest of mine was writing ownership. As I said before, academic support staff often write to represent. For example, a person might be asked to write a letter for signature by a higher up and geared to a specific audience. This is typical of many jobs in the academy, but how might the writer feel if the piece of writing is important to her or if she is supposed to present one view on a subject that she feels particularly strong about? Approaching this project, I found writing without ownership (what one interviewee calls "ghost writing") very problematic, but realize that this might have something to do with the high level of importance placed on ownership and publication in other parts of the academy. My orientation as a student has led me to believe that ownership of writing is important, despite that I myself don't often value ownership in my staff writing.

At least three interviewees[10] talked about writing copy for someone else's signature. As one interviewee described, "I often produce letters, give it to the individual to see if he or she wants to edit it, and then prepare it for signature. I've been doing that kind of writing for years and years."[11] I asked these interviewees if they found this work problematic or unfair, i.e. taking the time to produce well-crafted and deeply thought-out

[10] All interviewees' names and information have been kept confidential.
[11] Confidential taped interview B, March 31, 2009.

copy, but not being able to take credit for that work. When asked how they felt about this, most did not find it problematic, explaining that it was simply a part of the job. For these people, writing copy as "ghost writers" involves talking with a higher up about what is expected of the piece and who the audience is, reading for background or reading similar texts to get a sense of voice, writing the piece, and getting feedback and edits from the higher up or the signer.

One interviewee described one of her first writing tasks in her job. She said that she had been asked to write a letter to a group of alumni and wrote a powerful letter in which her own voice was very strong. She only later found out that she would not be the signer of the letter. She expressed some frustration at this situation, but also rationalized that she was still the writer of the letter and hence, could still use it as a writing sample later in her career. This specific case seems atypical of ghost writing tasks, especially because the writer was not informed in advance that she would be ghost writing.

Another interviewee described this type of writing as an interesting challenge, rather than a frustrating task. Describing writers as "ultimately observers," she said:

> Ghost writing may seem unfair to somebody who is outside of the equation, but in a way, it's an examination of character. So, you're dealing with, say, not just a faculty member's work, but also their voice. And that's a really interesting writing challenge: to be writing *for* somebody.[12]

In other words, she explained, for a person who identifies as a strong writer, taking up the task of reading a person's writing and voice and writing a piece that "feels like they wrote it"[13] is a gratifying challenge that a person who enjoys writing can embrace. For the most part, interviewees who talked about ghost writing explained that this writing was a part of their jobs, rather than work that defined them as people. In that sense, these tasks require

[12] Confidential taped interview E, April 10, 2009.
[13] Ibid.

that they write well (and often, represent another person's voice or an institution's mission well) and being fundamentally good writers is what makes this work gratifying.

*Identity and Voice.* I followed this up by asking about edits and feedback from others – if writing for someone else's signature is just detached work, does it matter how the writing is edited or who edits it? Generally, interviewees said they had no issues with having their work edited, because it is simply a part of the job. One interviewee said, "I am told what to write and my writing is edited by the person above me. Hierarchy does play a role there, but because I'm not writing as me or with my voice, I don't really feel like my voice is being stifled."[14] Because the writing represents the institution, rather than the individual writer, the writer doesn't feel personally tied to the final draft.

Following this comment, I talked to the interviewee about my own experiences with writing for GSE's web and print publications. I explained that I have generally written as a generic staff writer and because my name was not attached to any of the articles, I did not care about edits made. However, I once wrote a piece as "Doctoral student Melissa Kapadia-Bodi" and the editors of that piece had made some style edits to it, most of which were style choices I wouldn't make. In this case, I was a little frustrated by the style changes because they didn't reflect my writing voice. The interviewee then added that she feels the same way about style edits. For example, once, she had to use an earlier written letter, but sign her name onto it. As she read through the letter, she noticed that the person had added a postscript, something she would never do, and so she removed the postscript to make the letter better fit her writing style. Both these examples suggest that identity is strongly tied to workplace writing in that if a person knows that

[14] Confidential taped interview D, April 7, 2009.

her name will be attached to a piece of writing, she is much more likely to make that writing fit her personal style and views.

*Borrowing.* Tied into ownership of workplace writing is another complicated practice: borrowing. In the work that administrative support staff do, it is very typical to ask, “Can you provide some language for this?” In other words, it is quite common when a person is writing up a bio, an invite, an event listing, or a support letter, that they ask for starter language, which someone else provides. It is equally common that much of this generic language has been passed around, written and edited by many different people, and hence, that the author is unknown. Ownership of this language is rarely questioned. When asked about this (and about whether this kind of borrowing is a form of plagiarism), one interviewee said, “No – it is already in the public sphere.” She added that people don’t generally mind if someone borrows language from a web bio or event listing, especially because it means that the event is getting more publicity and that’s what the writer wants.[15]

Because borrowing language and incorporating multiple edits by multiple people is a common aspect of workplace writing, I believe that staff writing in the academy is unique in its ability to encourage and, in some instances, demand collaborative writing relationships. In my work at GSE, I often write emails, invitations, short bios, and other things for which I ask my boss and sometimes my co-workers for feedback. Because this feedback more often involves help with style, language choices, and inclusion of certain information, I think it tends to feel less intense or touchy than say, asking someone to comment on claims one makes in an academic paper. As I mention earlier, another factor

[15] Ibid.

that makes this kind of collaboration so easy is that the writers' names are not usually attached to the work, or the writing usually represents the overall mission of a department, school, or institution, rather than the opinions of one person.[16] Running things by my boss and co-workers is so typical of the way I write at work that it has informed my academic writing practices as well – I am very likely to ask others to read my writing and offer feedback before I turn something in. Still, when my name is attached to a piece of writing, I feel that I must have a final say on language, style, and content.

## Email and Work

Much has been written about email in the workplace, though most focuses less on how employees prepare for the workplace's growing technological demands on them, focusing instead on how employers should be wary of email and Internet abuse. Researchers and business writers alike focus on the negative impacts of email on the employer, rather than on the whole work setting. For example, Mastrangelo, et. al. (2006)'s study on employees' personal Internet use in the workplace found that surveyed employees were likely to use the Internet in both nonproductive[17] and

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[16] Writing this section, I am very clearly picturing the recent writing of a text at work and wishing I could provide an image to show the collaborative writing steps in action. It begins with one writer's notes – picture these in red writing—, which turn into a few paragraphs of text. A second writer – writing in blue – makes thorough edits in both style and content. Then, a third writer – writing in green – does the same thing. By the time the text is ready to be cleaned up, it looks like a rainbow and four or five people have worked on it. This makes me think that writing is always easier when it is done in collaboration. For example, as I mention above, when a person has to write something, s/he often asks, "Can you provide some starter language?" Similarly, it's easier to edit and cut down a piece when someone has provided ample language to work with. So, no matter what the stage of writing, it helps to have others doing other parts.

[17] Mastrangelo, et. al. (2006) defines "Non-productive Computer Use" as "behaviors that are not destructive, yet not directly productive," for example, chatting online ("Personal use of work computers: Distraction versus destruction;" p. 6).

counterproductive[18] ways while at work and that male employees and/or younger employees were more likely to use the Internet in non-work-related ways while on the clock. Mastrangelo, et. al. (2006), Egan (2007), and Brady (2006) all target the employer as their audience and as the victim of employees' "time theft,"[19] suggesting that employers find useful ways to reduce reliance on email and Internet-use at work.[20]

Only 2-3 years after these pieces were published, employees in the workplace cannot function in their jobs without knowledge and frequent use of email and the Internet. In fact, almost all of the people I interviewed said that a large part of their jobs is emailing. This was an especially interesting conversation to have with people who began working as academic support staff prior to the popular use of email. All agreed that it has changed the ways they do work, the ways they communicate and correspond with others, and the shape of the workday. For example, one interviewee said that she spends the first hour of her day going through her email, responding to people, and completing work-related email.[21] After that, much of her work still involves ongoing correspondence over email, whereas in the past, much of this happened by phone, in print, or in person.

*Rules, Formalities, Politeness, and Form.* Because so much work happens over email and it is a relatively new mode of communication in offices, I wanted to know

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[18] Mastrangelo, et. al. (2006) defines "Counterproductive Computer Use" as "behaviors that conflict with organizations' goals," adding that "these behaviors place the employer at risk legally (e.g., engaging in illegal activity) and financially (e.g., losing proprietary information)," for example, downloading porn or trading stocks ("Personal use of work computers: Distraction versus destruction;" p. 6).
[19] Using on-the-clock time in counterproductive ways (Sackett, P.R., & Wanek, J.E. (1996), as cited in Mastrangelo, et. al. (2006)).
[20] Brady, D. (2006). "*!#?@ the e-mail. Can we talk?"; Egan, M. (2007). "Is your email culture strangling you?"; Mastrangelo, P., et. al. (2006). "Personal use of work computers: Distraction versus destruction."
[21] Confidential taped interview A, March 31, 2009.

whether support staff have rules about how to email at work. When asked about her feelings about doing so much work over email, an interviewee said:

> I don't like email. I have a problem with email in that it takes the personal-ness out of things. I would rather have a conversation with someone on the telephone because I feel as though I can be a little direct [over email]. It's not rudeness; it's just directness. I don't tend to do the niceties that others try to do.[22]

Still, when asked if it has generally improved the ways we do businesses, she agreed that, "Email is quicker; people can think about their responses before they have to give it. It is so much more convenient."[23] Still, many interviewees talked more specifically about the rules they feel are necessary for workplace emailing. At least two interviewees said that despite the seeming informality of email, it is always necessary to write emails in complete sentences. Both expressed frustration at students' informal email tones.[24]

This gets more complex still. Two interviewees talked in much detail about developing rapport over email and the ways that email language changes depending on who you're emailing, the direction of the conversation, and how much back-and-forth has happened. As one interviewee, who corresponds with prospective students and introduces them to GSE's programs, said,

> I think our initial contact with a student absolutely has to start very formal because it sets up a comfortable level for that person that someone who is in authority or at least knows what they're talking about or is professional – it gives the recipient the security that this is the right person, the person I should be talking to about this topic.[25]

As we continued this conversation, the interviewee said that it's not necessarily that the person she is writing to "is expecting me to be formal. It's just something I feel I have to do. I think that people have a way of letting you know that they have an informal

[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Confidential taped interview C, March 31, 2009.

way themselves. Their response can influence me."[26] Another interviewee talked about her similar email practices. She explained that while she usually begins with very formal writing, she feels out the tone the respondent uses and changes her style to fit theirs.[27] Still, when I asked these interviewees who made these rules or how they know what tone to take in what situation, both said that it was part intuited and part knowledge of customer service.

*Professional Development?* Thinking about these interviewees' detailed explanations of getting email tone and response right, it occurs to me that academic support staff participate in a complex culture of writing and response. As an interviewee explained it, "The emails can start out very formal and turn into a slower version of instant messaging."[28] They insist a customer service orientation is pivotal to getting this right, but I wonder what this suggests about professional development geared towards emailing.

Should staff receive technical training and professional development around email (i.e. using email, etiquette, and the like)? One interviewee said, "There really is no training – I think it's your own personal communication skills. I think in the business that we're in, everyone should be trained in customer training because that's the business that we're in."[29] As I mention earlier, while I found research on emailing and politeness, I could not find much on training staff to be polite, or to know when to give a more polite or more informal response. Still, since emailing is relatively new to many academic

[26] Ibid.
[27] Confidential taped interview D, April 7, 2009.
[28] Confidential taped interview C, March 31, 2009.
[29] Confidential taped interview A, March 31, 2009.

support staff, and since most of their "customers," i.e. incoming students, correspond most frequently over email, it seems pivotal that professional development target this particular literacy.

## Power Structures and Identity

*The Academic Food Chain.* In further thinking about email and the complex culture of email response, I wondered whether this was really a service-oriented knowledge or whether it is also socially oriented. Where do the rules of how to respond to different email audiences, what tone to use, and so on really come from? Are power hierarchies present and do they influence these writing and response decisions?

A few interviewees talked in detail about the ways they switch tone in email, the ways they choose whom to send what to and how often to send reminders, and so on. Generally speaking, they made a few interesting distinctions: they email students frequently and often use more informal language, but they email faculty infrequently and use more formal language. When asked about this, one interviewee said, "I don't want to bother the faculty because they are busy and have important things to do. On the other hand, students might forget about an event and need a reminder."[30] It seems clear, then, that academic support staff also consider the social and academic hierarchy and that this hierarchy informs how they do their work.

I asked other interviewees more specific questions about awareness of a hierarchy in academia. Two interviewees responded that they were very aware of the power structures, but weren't bothered by them. As one interviewee said,

[30] Confidential taped interview F, April 10, 2009.

> I see this place as a very hierarchical place and the faculty – it is their place; it is not my place. While they seem to respect me and think I'm smart, I'm very aware that I'm not one of the tribe and so I try to be not exactly deferential, but to signal in some way that I'm in a service role. I wouldn't be here if they weren't here. They are doing the core work of this institution, not me.

The interviewee added that she was comfortable with the hierarchy of this place because she knew her job and was happy doing it.

This brings me back to some earlier comments made by a few interviewees about doing their jobs well. As one interviewee explained, doing writing work comes easy to her and it is a part of her job, but that's all it is.[31] I find this really interesting, especially the separation of work and life. Most academic support staff, including those who felt they were good at writing, did not equate this work with life work. This makes me ask, what does it mean that people often don't claim ownership over the work they do "at work," i.e. that they are able to separate that work from who they consider their pure/true selves? I think this is a really important distinction between academic support staff and faculty – for faculty, academic work is tied up with personal interests and the work writing that faculty do gets published under their names. So, in many ways, there is no separation between work and personal life. Is ownership of writing important? Is "owning" writing something that enables faculty to sit high on the academic food chain and writing without ownership something that places academic support staff on the bottom of the food chain?

*Are We Writers?* I asked every interviewee, "Do you consider yourself a writer?" As one interviewee explained, this question is complicated:

[31] Confidential taped interview E, March 31, 2009.

> I mean, am I a person who writes? Yes. But I take that question to mean, 'Are you a writer? Is that your profession?' And I would say that I'm not a writer because that's not my profession. It's like if someone asked, 'Do you consider yourself a reader?' Yes – I read and I write, but if someone asked me what I do, I wouldn't say, 'I'm a reader or I'm a writer.' I don't think there's anything wrong with saying, 'I'm a good writer' or 'I have the ability to write,' but I would never offer that as my profession.[32]

Despite that many interviewees agreed that they wrote strongly and effectively, only one identified as a writer.

This brings me back to Gelade (2007)'s study on academic professional development and her discussion of "what counts" as academic at her Australian university.[33] She found that academics felt that research and publication were important academic work. The rest, including teacher professional development and administrative training, often fell by the wayside because of academics' negative perceptions of these tasks. In the same manner, academic support staff seem to think their writing is not "true" writing because it is support writing, rather than writing for publication. In this way, too, an institutional model of what counts as writing influences academic support staff members' writer identities.

## Reflections and Next Steps

### Limitations and Personal Work

As I say earlier, my dual role at GSE makes it possible for me to do this border-crossing work, but also complicates the actual doing of it. For example, I found that when I was interviewing staff members, I was aware of our work relationships and felt

[32] Confidential taped interview D, April 7, 2009.
[33] Gelade, S. (2007). "Workplace learning in academia: (Older) bones of contention."

uncomfortable asking interviewees I knew less well questions about hierarchy and power structures in the workplace. I hope that as I continue to work with staff in this ongoing project, conversations around power and positioning in the academy will become more comfortable. I worry that my being positioned as a student or researcher might distance staff from me or in other ways negatively affect our relationships. I'm not yet sure how to fix this. This project has reminded me that what is most important to me is to maintain my friendships with staff, many of whom I consider mentors, and to use this work as a means of serving of academic support staff.

Reflecting on the assumptions I have made and continue to make as I write this project and continue to work on it, I find that my perceptions and beliefs about ownership, identity, and writing are strongly oriented with my student self and the things I'm reading, talking about, and thinking in that space. My conversations with staff have helped me to reorient some of my thinking, especially my thoughts on ownership and collaboration. I hope that my staff self's attitudes toward writing can influence my student self's research and writing practices.

Similarly, I find that much of my thinking about hierarchies in academic spaces stems from the peculiar arrangement of being in a staff position where I, in many ways, play a service role to faculty members. Living this service role and then being a doctoral student in the same building has drastically reframed my perceptions of faculty and of the academy in general. While a few people I interviewed talked about the work they do at GSE as merely work, i.e. a world they can shut off, I find that it becomes more and more difficult for me to shut this world off. My staff and student selves exist in one academic space, so negotiating that space is constant work and my awareness of academic power

structures has drastically informed the way I think about the kind of "academic" I want to be. Having an insider perspective as a staff member though gives me added agency as a student – I truly believe that I can do important research and writing, as well as be a community-focused education practitioner, without being affiliated with a university. In this way, my staff knowledge empowers my student self.

## Future Work

I hope to do more work with academic support staff in which we talk about the writing we do at work, our writing identities, and how academic hierarchies position us as people, workers, and writers in academia. Here are some ideas I have right now:

- Interviewing academic support staff, looking at our writing and talking about it
- Designing professional development workshops with academic support staff that focus on writing, emailing, and maybe a slew of other relevant topics
- Co-writing, co-presenting, and co-publishing with co-workers
- Starting an informal writing group with other academic support staff interested in exploring other modes of writing, exploring power issues in the workplace, doing personal work, talking with and supporting each other

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