

**“I’m nobody’s Mum in this University”: the gendering of work around student writing in UK Higher Education**

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**Abstract**

A number of recent studies have raised critical questions about the gendering of academic labour in the contemporary university as workplace. This paper focuses on gendering discourses of work around student writing which surfaced in an ethnographically oriented study of fourteen academic teacher participants based in six diverse UK Universities in a range of disciplines. I draw on study findings to show that work with undergraduate writing and writers is often understood through feminising discourses of ‘care’ which explicitly and implicitly invoke stereotypically female caring roles in ways which reflect and perpetuate the marginalised status of writing work and at the same time infantilise students. I argue that the reassertion of care as a core academic value is necessary to counter such feminising discourses because such a reassertion challenges an unhelpful dichotomous separation between academic knowledge-making on one hand, and student writing as a personal issue on the other.

**Key Words:** academic labour, academic literacies, care, emotional labour, gendering, discourse

## **Introduction**

As higher education has made the transition from elite to mass education system, the nature of academic life and work in the UK has changed profoundly (Ball 2003; Butterwick and Dawson 2005; Evans 2005; Lea and Stierer 2011). Far from nostalgic notions of academic life as a release from the mundane realities of work, questions of escalating academic workloads (Hey 2001; Morley 2003: 93-99; Gill 2014), the accelerated academy (Ylijoki et al. 2013) and a “24/7 culture of availability” (Lynch 2010: 63) are much to the fore. A number of authors have argued that there has been a reluctance on the part of academics to examine the “conditions of their own production” (Hey 2001: abstract; see also Butterwick and Dawson 2005); however, in this changing climate, greater attention is being paid to academic life as labour in the sociological sense (Gill 2014), including a growing body of research investigating how academics’ working lives and opportunities intersect with gender. For example, Leathwood and Read (2009) argue that, despite moral panics about the increasing representation of women in higher education, academic life and success is still strongly predicated on an academic identity which assumes few or no responsibilities beyond work and almost unlimited time to devote to it. This, they contend, profoundly disadvantages women who are still subject to a ‘care imperative’, since they continue to disproportionately bear the burden of caring for children and elderly dependants and for management of the domestic sphere (see also

Clegg et al. 2004; Clegg 2008; Lynch 2010; Acker 2012). An increasing lack of clear boundaries between private and professional academic life and work has gendered effects, where women are particularly disadvantaged by the contradictory demands of two “greedy” institutions, the family and academia (Grummell, Devine and Lynch 2009; Currie, Harris and Thiele 2000; Acker and Armenti 2004). This significantly raises the costs to individual women of a choice to pursue an academic career; for example, many in senior roles choose not to have children (Leathwood and Read 2009; Grummell, Devine and Lynch 2009; Bailyn 2003). Women are also disproportionately burdened with what is constructed as a personal responsibility for achieving “work-life balance” and so with the additional work of “sustaining a balance between these two spheres” (Tofoletti and Starr 2016: 498).

Higher education research has tended to focus more on the impact of women academics’ culturally imposed responsibility for care outside the university workplace, rather than on their experiences of ‘caring’ within it. However, there has also been some interest in how the ‘care imperative’ might play out within the workplace, for example in gendered divisions of research labour (Hey 2001; Morley 1994) and between research, teaching and service (Acker and Feuerverger 1996; Acker and Dillabough 2007; Misra et al. 2012; Acker and Webber 2013). This work is echoed in the work of feminist researchers who have foregrounded the related concept of ‘emotional labour’ or ‘emotion work’, often overlooked by traditional sociological research, which they argue is hidden, undervalued and often unevenly distributed between men and women within the academic workplace (Hey 2001; Hochschild 2003; Butterwick and Dawson 2005; Acker and Feuerverger 1996; Blackmore 1996). These authors are rightly concerned with the

inequitable impact of such gendered hierarchies and unfair distributions of work on women's career progression and on the quality of their working experience within higher education. Collectively they point to the fact that women tend to do the 'double shift' – not only across the different domains of work and life/home/family – but also *within* the workplace, taking a disproportionate share of the undervalued work of 'personal support'.

However, when notions of 'care' and of 'emotional labour' migrate to the workplace itself, particularly when applied to the university setting and the labour of knowledge workers such as academics, they require careful and perhaps different theorising on two counts. Firstly, although the focus might sometimes be on caring as a practical and demanding activity mostly done by women (as is most often the case where the competing demands of work and family are at issue), the notion of caring in academia goes beyond this to encompass a professional ethic emphasising "receptivity, relatedness and responsiveness rather than rights and rules" (Salisbury 2013: 53). While this broader construction of caring as an academic value is not devoid of gender-normative associations of 'nurturing' as feminine, caring in the academic context is not only a 'woman's value' and its effects on individual women and men are complex (Huyton, 2013). This holistic understanding of 'care' encompasses both emotional and intellectual engagement, a teacher's passionate commitment both to subject and to students.

Secondly, working with students in the conditions of contemporary 'mass' higher education throws up deeply ambivalent and contested perspectives on care. Bozalek et al. (2016) provide a well-developed and useful definition of an ethics of care which they trace by focusing on feedback around written assignments, drawing on Boud and Molloy's (2013) dialogical framing of feedback and on Tronto's (1993) political ethics of

care. However, the context on which they base their explorations is of a small, close-knit group of participants on a professional development course for higher educators. Under such conditions, caring becomes unambiguously worthwhile, even if it does involve the hard work of ‘caring for’ as well as ‘caring about’ others. However, often caring as a practice in the contemporary academy frequently involves navigating a tricky tension between caregiving as an undervalued and exhausting chore or even as a form of performative “emotional display” (Salisbury 2013: 48) on one hand, and enactment of a deep commitment and engagement on the other. Caring under pressurised conditions becomes a site of contestation, and gendered constructions of academic identity (Clegg 2010) and professionalism (Murray 2006) which exclude care as an academic value create tensions and difficulties for both female and male academics who see caring as integral to their role.

Work with student writing connects with a holistic but ambivalent understanding of care for a number of reasons – it is incremental, cyclical and slow, it often takes place in hidden spaces e.g. at home and in personal tutorials, often involves listening, empathy, attention to identities and meanings, and to the ‘whole person’ – the intellectual, emotional and even physical. It is also an exceptionally demanding and time-consuming aspect of the role of academics with teaching responsibilities (particularly in setting, supporting and assessing students’ written work, Tuck 2012) and frequently straddles, in both time and space, the increasingly blurred boundary between academics’ working and home lives. It is therefore perhaps surprising that few of the authors discussed above who focus on gendered divisions of labour in higher education refer explicitly to this aspect of academic labour. Grummell et al (2009) make some reference to work activities such as

marking which would fall within the category of ‘work with student writing’; Bozalek et al (2016) focus on care in feedback on written assignments; but writing itself is backgrounded and work with student writing remains an implicit dimension of gendered academic labour in most studies.

However, in language-related higher education fields such as writing development and English for Academic Purposes, some researchers have raised important questions about work in the academy which resonate powerfully with the broader literature on the gendering of academic labour outlined above and which have the potential to speak to the broader field of higher education research in this regard. Turner has described “language work” with students in gendered terms as “Cinderella” work (Turner 2004, 2011), arguing that the “intellectual rigour and arduous labour” (2011: 31) involved for both students and teachers is rarely recognised. Others have commented on the gendered politics of discrete language support work, for example Blythman and Orr in their ironically entitled 2006 paper: “Mrs Mop Does Magic”. In the US context, possibly due to the significant proportion of women in the domain of Composition as a discrete element in first year higher education (Holbrook 1991), a substantial literature has emerged which foregrounds issues of gender in relation to compositionists’ work with students’ writing taking place outside the disciplines. For example, Horner (2007: 168) contends that the “social materiality” of the “service” labour involved in working with students’ writing is easily “occluded”, and acknowledges the gendered nature of such occlusion: “WPA [Writing Program Administration] work, like ‘women’s work’, appears to be more ‘shared’ (and therefore somehow less ‘real’) than other work when, indeed, it is recognised as ‘work’ at all” (see also Horner, 2016). Horner draws on a number of

authors whose empirical work has thrown light on the gendered politics of labour in Composition in the US (Holbrook 1991; Schell 1998; Tuell 1992; Crowley 2002). This US-based debate focuses on those who work specifically in the domains of Composition and Basic Writing, rather than on academic teachers in the disciplines (i.e. 'faculty' in the American lexicon).

These strands of work in the literature emerging from language-related spaces in higher education such as EAP and Composition together provide an illuminating case in point which can contribute to wider higher education debates on the gendering of academic labour. However, there has been little empirical focus on the gendering of the labour of academic teachers supporting student writers *within the disciplines*. On one hand, this is a curious omission given that activities such as setting and marking assignments, supporting and giving feedback to student writers, occupy a substantial proportion of academics' time. On the other, the role of gendering may be more salient in domains such as EAP and Composition because of the preponderance of women in these writing-related fields of practice. However, this paper is based on the notion that the gendering of academic writing work is in part a discursive process, not directly related to whether women or men do most of this work (a question which is not empirically explored here.) The current paper contributes to our understanding of the gendering of academic writing work by considering the specific context of work around student writing done by disciplinary academic teachers in UK universities.

Many of the authors discussed above draw on the lived experiences and practices of individuals (women, and sometimes men) in the academy as a vital source of information for their analysis at the level of institutional practices and social relations; as

Acker and Feuerverger put it: “it is what the university stands for, and what it rewards and what it ignores, that is at issue” (1996: 417). This is in keeping with an increasing attention to gender, or rather gendering, as a social practice, entailing a perpetual dynamic between the structural and emergent, between the set of practices (including discursive practices) which are culturally, discursively and physically available in any particular context, and the moment-to-moment construction and reconstruction of gender through saying and doing (Poggio 2006). This conceptualisation of gender helps to explain how substantial institutional effects can sometimes be produced through subtle gendering processes which are often practised with only “liminal awareness” (Martin 2006: 258). For this very reason, gendering can be difficult to study ‘head on’. It can play a powerful role even when none of the participants is consciously either evoking or challenging gender norms: thus “practices that are not at first glance gender-specific...need to be examined through the lens of gender analysis” (Acker and Armenti 2004: 19).

In this paper I report on a qualitative study which did not initially set out to explore practices around student writing in gendered terms, for example interview schedules did not foreground gendering. Rather, gender emerged as significant in the form of feminising discourses of writing work which became evident as the project unfolded, surfacing in the form of familial analogies and nurturing imagery in the words of participants. This discursive feminisation framed writing work as ‘only’ emotional or pastoral, and as of lower value, particularly as lacking intellectual value. The paper therefore seeks to add to existing work by drawing on an ethnographically oriented exploration of practices around student writing, analysed through a gender-sensitive lens,

in order to generate insight into the discursive gendering of a key aspect of academic activity.

The research study reported on here draws on the ethnographically-oriented empirical approach adopted by researchers in the field of academic literacies (see e.g. Lillis and Tuck 2016, Lillis and Scott 2007 for overviews; Ivanič 1998 and Lea and Street 1998 for foundational studies). As a field of enquiry, academic literacies draws on a range of theoretical, empirical and pedagogic traditions, including New Literacy Studies, Critical Discourse Analysis and on the chiefly North American domains of Writing in the Disciplines/Writing Across the Curriculum. It articulates an understanding of academic writing as situated and contested *social practice*, intimately bound up with issues of power and identity in institutional context. This notion connects specific instances of discourse and meaning making – spoken/heard speech, written/read text - with what people do (and with how they understand what they do), and recognises that what people do with language reflects and feeds into larger, albeit changing and contested, institutional and social structures (Barton and Hamilton 1998; Lillis 2008). Methodologically, academic literacies places the focus on the perspectives of “actual tutors and student-writers with their particular understandings and interests” (Lillis 2001: 75) – i.e. writers and their teachers as ‘whole people’ -, rather than focusing on texts alone. Thus, although little published work in the field has specifically focused on gender, its social practice focus provides a potentially powerful research lens for exploring academic readers’ and writers’ experiences as structured by/structuring gender (alongside class, ethnicity, and linguistic heritage). This is illustrated by a number of empirical studies of academic writers which draw conclusions about the gendering of

academic writing (Ivanič 1998; Lillis 2001; Read, Francis and Robinson 2001; Rai 2004; McMullan 2012).

As a field, academic literacies has made an important contribution to our understanding of students' frequent difficulties and confusions as they seek to produce academic texts which will be deemed successful by teachers and examiners. The current study broadened this research lens, setting out to explore the practices of academic teachers in the disciplines, practices which play a major role in constituting academic literacies for students. This paper therefore brings together insights from the literature on the gendering of academic labour, together with a detailed ethnographic focus on one particular aspect of that labour, in order to explore the gendering of work around student writing in universities. This gendering surfaced in feminising discourses of care drawn on by participants in the study in interviews and other talk about academic writing work, and in ethnographic field notes. I argue that caring about students and caring about the discipline are currently often seen as being in tension with one another, and that this in turn contributes to a damaging separation between emotional and intellectual labour, with detrimental consequences for staff and students, and for the role of writing in the academy.

### **The study: data generation and analysis.**

The study involved fourteen academic teacher participants, six women and eight men, based in six very diverse higher education institutions in the UK ranging from elite, predominantly research-focused institutions Oxbridge University (OBU) and Russell Group University (RGU) to less prestigious, more teaching-oriented newer institutions

Post-1992 (P92U), New Universities 1 (NU1) and 2 (NU2), and including Distance Learning University (DLU). They were selected to be located in disciplines ranging from Computer Science to History to Sports Studies, at different stages in their careers as academic teachers, levels of seniority, and of different ages and genders, in order to capture as wide a range as possible of differences and thus to some extent address “expected relevant heterogeneity” (Gomm, Hammersley and Foster 2000: 107) amongst academic teachers. Data were generated from a range of sources: interviews (and their transcripts), including “talk around texts” (Lillis 2008, 2009), audio-recorded observations, printed and institutional material, university web pages, field notes, audio-recordings made by participants while marking students’ written work, e-mails and asynchronous online forum messages. Lillis (2008: 382) argues that the use of “a broad range of data in collection and analysis” is a key aspect of ethnographic methodology and that “multiple data sources help to build rich descriptions and understandings of the particular material conditions in which people live and work” (ibid. 372), helping the researcher to tune in to what is important to participants. Thus, in the context of this study, what counts as ‘student writing work’ is to some extent guided by participants. The lens is widened far beyond students’ texts themselves to incorporate elements of personal literacy history, institutional policies, and the broad and complex network of activities “behind the words”, as one participant expressed it, which impinge on student writing (see Tuck 2012).

A useful analogy for the analytical process used in the study is that of warp and weft: case studies based around individual participants formed the warp threads, while reading

for patterns across the study created the weft. This builds on Barton and Hamilton's (1998) concept of vertical and horizontal analysis but suggests a more contingent and less neat process, conveying a sense of shuttling back and forth between different types of data and pulling elements from each together to make sense of what is going on. The data presented in this paper were mainly gathered during interviews where participants were talking about their work with student writers: thus their practices are seen here primarily through the lens of the discourses which they drew on to describe their work. I also draw on field notes made during visits to the sites of participants' work with student writing (whether in the office/classroom or at home).

The specific research questions explored in this paper are:

- How do academic teachers' discourses and practices contribute to and reflect the gendering of academic work around student writing in the disciplines?
- What are the consequences of such gendering?

The following section traces key weft patterns which emerged across the study in response to these questions.

### **Key emerging themes**

#### ***Work around student writing on the work/'life' boundary***

The lived realities of work around student writing – particularly work with students' texts, since these are physically or electronically portable - means that it is often done at marginal times (late at night, early in the morning) and in marginal places (at the kitchen

table, in bed, on the train) (Tuck 2012). Most participants in the study commented on their experience of a temporal as well as a spatial blurring of the boundaries around work and home life. In an interview at her home, Pam, teaching Psychology part time at Distance Learning University and Post-1992 University (DLU and P92U) provides an illuminating summary of her typical weekday:

Today, for example, I've got up, taken three different children to three different buildings, a man to work ... I've been on an interview myself, come back and helped you with this [the research study], then I'm going do some cooking then ... some reading, and then I'm going to mark some essays at midnight ... <sup>i</sup>

Pam marks student essays either at a small folding kitchen table or on a computer tucked under the stairs in an open plan living/hallway area, only a few feet from the front door. The children appear several times during our first interview (in the kitchen), and her partner during the second (in the living area) and Pam fields queries from them about where to find snacks in between responses to my questions. In field notes I sketch her workspace and record that "I am struck by the small space she has to work in and its proximity to family life". This spatial arrangement partly explains why she often marks essays early in the morning and late at night.

This blurring of 'work' and 'life' was not confined to the women in the study or to those working part time or designated as home workers. Dan, teaching Geography at Russell Group University (RGU), complains that students working on an assignment will

send an e-mail you know at midnight and I happen to actually receive it at that time whilst I'm checking out the football scores...and it's often a little bit too chatty and there is an assumption that I would answer it by return and I mean I will answer if it's asked in an appropriate manner but there are times when I've had to say you know you'll have to wait till Thursday or whatever.

While the concerns expressed by Dan are more focussed on the blurring between work and leisure than on managing competing home and work responsibilities, this comment nevertheless illustrates the potential for work around student writing to be pushed to the very margins of the day, and to interpenetrate with leisure activities – even those undertaken at midnight. Even much of the face-to-face work with students around their writing which participants described took place at the end of the working day, or was squeezed in between other, officially recognised or more high profile activities. For example, Deborah who teaches History at a post-1992 institution (P92U) schedules face-to-face meetings with students to discuss assignment feedback at the end of the day. This is also when she arranges to give mini-tutorials on aspects of writing which she believes they have “never been taught” before, such as the use of apostrophes.

### ***Work around student writing on the personal/academic boundary***

The marginal position of student writing-related work was not only a question of time and place. As Angela, a postgraduate teaching Anthropology part time at Oxbridge

University (OBU), explains, some of her work with students' writing occurs at the boundaries between what is and is not part of her job as she understands it:

It's not like I have a job as [a member of staff] ... my job is to deliver the tutorials really and mark [students'] essays, it's not really to go above and beyond, and I don't mind doing it when I can but at the moment I'm just really heavily collared for time.

Work around students' writing becomes squeezed into the "above and beyond", not fully acknowledged at institutional level, but necessary to meet students' perceived needs. Angela's wording suggests that she believes that this might be an academic staff member's "job" even if it is not hers. But participants in the study, including those who had full time permanent academic positions, frequently referred to aspects of their routine work with student writing as not "really" being "their job". This suggests that work with student writing and writers can often be described as "shadow work" ... "the work you need to do to get the job done, that doesn't get considered as a part of the job ... and ... hardly earns you a notch on your CV" (Butterwick and Dawson, citing Ilich 2005: 61). Butterwick and Dawson are writing about gendered inequalities in the tenure review process, but data emerging across the present study suggest a tendency for a great deal of work around students' writing to occupy this same shadowy, marginal area of unrecognised responsibility.

In some cases the fuzzy boundaries around responsibility for student writing were drawn between the more ‘personal’ elements *within* the academic’s role and those which were associated with subject teaching and assessment. For example, students come to Emma (Computer Studies, RGU) as “personal tutor” for support on a written assignment, asking “What in heaven’s name are we supposed to do?”, because they do not feel able to ask the (male) colleague who has set the written task. This is partly the result of blurred boundaries between what is/is not part of the academic subject teacher’s job where writing is concerned, which mean that when students seek guidance outside limited written advice supplied to all, they see this as ‘personal’ help and so something to go to the “personal tutor” with. Pam (DLU and P92U) resists the expectation (of students) that she should “get involved in pastoral care, be a social worker” which she believes is not her remit.

One consequence of this location on the boundaries for much writing work is that it lends itself more easily than officially recognised tasks to unfair distribution. Academic teachers who are perceived to be more accessible by students are more likely to be approached for support with written assignments. Robert (P92U) comments on this uneven and unacknowledged task distribution in his context:

if you’re available as a member of staff with an open door quite often you end up being the person who fields these enquiries and perhaps other colleagues don’t even realise that that’s happening. I’m sure they’re quite happy for colleagues who do it to continue do it.

For Angela (OBU) there are some benefits in terms of students' gratitude:

I think they [students] appreciate at some level that I'm more available to them than some of their other tutors are, possibly because of my age and because I've offered, and possibly 'cause I'm just a little less intimidating.

Personal availability and accessibility were connected in some cases explicitly with the notion of 'caring'. For example, during a research observation visit to Emma's institution, I record in field notes a remark made by a male colleague of hers that Emma puts a lot more work into marking student assignments than he does. On two occasions I observed a series of face-to-face meetings held by Emma and the same colleague with small groups of Computer Science students to discuss an extended abstract they have submitted in preparation for writing a journal-style article. The assignment was to be jointly assessed: Emma explains "my co-lecturer and I mark together". On both occasions, Emma arrives with detailed written notes for feeding back to the groups while her colleague appears to read the students' submissions during the fifteen minute session, contributing spontaneous general remarks to the discussion. My field notes record his comment to me that Emma "actually cares" whether students understand her lectures and that he states, only partly in jest, that he does not.

*Gendering work with student writing as emotional – not intellectual – labour*

Work around writing was often experienced by participants in the study as time-consuming, and attracting little institutional recognition (see Tuck 2012). This created dilemmas for participants around their professional identities within their institutional contexts, especially for those in “research-led” settings, about the risks of “being seen” to take too much interest in students’ writing (Dan, RGU) (see Tuck 2016). Writing work was often seen by participants as being done in their ‘own time’ as a ‘voluntary’ thing. For example, Martin, at RGU medical school, comments that he has to “harness” colleagues’ “good will” in order to find staff willing to supervise dissertations. This low and ‘voluntary’ status for work around writing created conflicts of identity for participants, which were sometimes explicitly articulated in terms of gender. Pam (DLU and P92U) clearly associates the work done to support students with writing with a particular kind of ‘voluntary’ (i.e. unpaid) role:

I’m nobody’s Mum in this University, so when the students are begging me for things I just think I really need to direct you on to somebody else who might have more time and patience and actually get paid for it.

Here, perceptions of such work as unpaid, and of the difficulty of drawing boundaries around it because of its emotional/relational dimension, are expressed in clearly gendered terms. Pam’s account conjures up an image of academic teacher-as-mother and students-as-needy-children clamouring for help with their writing, with needs too overwhelming to be met by a disciplinary teacher. Her words also suggest work around writing requires a level of emotional labour beyond the teacher’s remit:

I can be patient when I'm teaching a study skills course, but I'm not paid to do that ... I'm getting paid to (.) teach.

Pam comments that she is torn between what she calls the "bossy" and the "caring" sides of her personality when she is marking students' written work:

If people can't spell, or can't construct paragraphs, don't know what spacing they should be using, can't reference, it really infuriates me that they've even come on the course, but then the helpful friendly caring person steps in and then I do try and help people.

Pam's comments also suggest that she thinks work with students' writing should be (re)located in the support, care or welfare provision of the university:

They [students] need to get somebody else to help them with those things... like spelling, paragraph construction, commas, etiquette ... referencing, they need to go and ask a library kind of person to get help or do a study skills course.

These extracts suggest that, while Pam does not explicitly assert that work with student writers is gendered, the gendering discourse that she uses, associating work with student writers with patience, friendliness, caring and, significantly, mothering, serves as a means of discursively drawing a line between what should and should not be an academic

teacher's job. In practical terms, a gendering discourse of writing work is bound up with decisions about when to refer a student writer to someone else for help, and consequently constructs a feminised, emotionally supportive but non-academic space for student writers as lying outside disciplinary teaching responsibilities.

The gendering of work around student writing surfaced in subtle ways in the discourse of male participants as well as from women in the study. For example, during a part of an interview where we are talking about what Russell (DLU and P92U) sees as a decline in students' written skills, he refers to debates in his institution:

Here at Post-1992 university ... we really need to do something a bit more woomph to get them to know what it's like to be an undergraduate, with an ability to go out and have certain skills, not make it specialised "oh they're not that good, let's send off to Auntie Floss down the road and she'll sort them out" you know.

"Auntie Floss" seems a significant choice of metaphor for 'skills support' in the academy. As with Pam's "library kind of person", Russell's use of the term "specialised" here seems to suggest 'special to particular students' who would be sent off "down the road", away from the core of academic activity, to receive kind, caring but possibly amateurish support in a special unit, a service without much "woomph". His choice to personify such support in the figure of Auntie Floss is an example of the discursive gendering of such work which clearly reflects – and arguably perpetuates – its asymmetrical status. While Russell is describing a debate within his institution and so

seems to be at least partly aware of the patronising associations of his metaphor, at the same time, his feminising discourse characterises writing support as non-academic, non-intellectual and remedial.

Other participants used metaphors evoking the more practical side of caring labour in the context of work around students' academic literacies. Deborah (P92U), explains why in some cases it is essential that students' work is not assessed anonymously, for example in the case of a second year portfolio, completed over two terms:

With something like this, where you're taking them through a process, and you need to be holding their hand all the way through the process, they need to know that you are holding **their** hand. [Deborah's emphasis]

'Handholding' in Deborah's case takes the form of copious and detailed written feedback on students' scripts, combined with individual face-to-face meetings, with the opportunity for students to resubmit their work at the end of the process. Deborah's account of this rationale for waiving the usual institutional requirement for anonymity in written assessment suggest that she regards this opportunity for 'handholding' in a positive light. Deborah also appears to associate some of the hard work around student writing – in particular she has been talking about the “constant stream of students” at her and departmental colleagues' doors, or e-mailing, with queries prior to essay deadlines – with caring:

We do it because as a department our ethos is very much that we care about the students.

Deborah's talk of the "constant stream of students" echoes Pam's sense of students "begging" for help: work with student writers is experienced as trying to meet the insatiable and intense demands of 'needy' students.

There were other occasions in interviews where participants in the study used care-related metaphors for work around writing which suggested that certain activities encourage child-like helplessness on the part of students, for example the commonly occurring 'spoon feeding'. Angela, a postgraduate student teacher at Oxbridge University (OBU), expresses a concern that she shouldn't "baby" students by giving them reading material which is too easy. She also dramatises a reported conversation she has had with a French male PhD colleague who also teaches undergraduate tutorials. When she shared with him her concerns about an undergraduate who was not turning his essays in, Angela reports his response thus:

"In France ... the weaklings just fall to the side ... don't wipe their bottoms for them, they're not babies you know."

The use of caregiving metaphors which infantilise students – and represent work with writing as a remedial and non-intellectual – contribute to and arise from normative unhelpful assumptions which are gendered and gendering. However, Angela's dramatized telling of this conversation (complete with mock French accent) suggests that

she at least partly rejects her colleague's suggestion that taking students' struggles with writing seriously is or should be regarded as a low value – even distastefully intimate – activity. Unlike Deborah's comment above which signals a departmental ethos, Angela's own values appear to be at odds with others in her current context, perhaps reflecting her more isolated role as a graduate teaching assistant.

As many of the above examples show, understanding writing work as care does not always signal its rejection by academic teachers, whether or not it is seen as an intrinsic part of the job or valued by colleagues. As Deborah (P92U) put it: "We care passionately about our students and we care passionately about our research". This spontaneous parallelism from Deborah appears to raise caring for and about students to the same level as caring about one's research, and to assert that even where they may represent conflicting demands of time and energy, both forms of passion/caring are worth striving for as part of the work of the academic teacher in the disciplines. As Adkins (2001:672) comments: "gendering is by no means fixed but rather is continuously made, remade and contested". Rather than a feminising discourse which downgrades writing-related work through metaphors which infantilise students and patronise teachers who take an interest in student writing, there appears to be a subtle form of positive 'regendering' at work here, a vision of the work of academic teaching in which the intellectual and emotional elements of academic labour, traditionally understood as a binary, are consciously re-integrated. However, underpinning material conditions mean that there is a price to pay. Deborah goes on to comment that

...and as a result we're all exhausted and I don't know how much longer it can go on.

The effort of integrating intellectual and emotional labour in academic work is exhausting, not least because it is undervalued at institutional level and thus poorly resourced in institutional terms. A feminised construction of such labour, which disaggregates the emotional from the intellectual, enables lower (monetary) value to be accorded to writing work, which in part explains the persistence of such models in the managerialist university (see Tuck 2018). If academic teachers in the disciplines show students 'they care' enough to support them in their academic writing struggles and triumphs, they run the risk of being overwhelmed.

### ***Work around writing as pastoral care in the personal curriculum***

The previous section showed that participants often located responsibility for students' writing in support or welfare spaces *outside* the discipline and that this form of boundary setting was signalled discursively for some by a rejection of a "social worker", child carer or maternal professional identity. Writing provision *within* the discipline by academic teachers was also frequently associated with care and welfare as part of their disciplinary teaching role, but in the process the emotional and intellectual elements of the labour of academic writing were again often separated discursively. In some academics' contexts, there were well-established arrangements associating work around students' writing with pastoral care within the Department or School. For example, in Dan's Russell Group university, writing formed part of the curriculum for small group

tutorials taught partly by academic “personal tutors” and partly by postgraduates, who appeared to be responsible for the bulk of the tutoring programme’s marking and feedback. In other cases (Mike, Diane, both at New Universities), the rise of Personal Development Planning (PDP) had resulted in a reallocation of resources for supporting students’ writing, overseen by personal tutors recruited from students’ main discipline. For example, Mike (NU1) describes the system which has been introduced in his institution:

Students are put in set tutor groups ... you meet them individually ... once a semester minimum, and sometimes more and it’s everything from welfare issues, accommodation problems, “my girlfriend’s left me”, to “how do I get my work into the first class category ‘cause I keep on getting sixty-eight” ...that’s how we talk to them about how to write and things like that, but it’s not formalized in any kind of syllabus, it’s as an ‘as necessary’, but that’s how we would do it now.

In this extract, students’ writing development occurs alongside addressing “personal” issues within discipline-specific arrangements. The association between writing and the personal/pastoral care was reinforced in some participants’ contexts by the tendency for most face-to-face discussion with students about their writing to be in the form of informal one-to-one drop-in or ‘office hours’ practices which lend themselves to a particular framing of interaction around student writing and of student writers themselves. As Robert (P92U) explained:

[we have] open doors and students can come, send us a message or physically come to the door and knock and with their concerns and I'll try to help them overcome some obstacles if that's what they've got - it tends to be people who've got problems rather than people who are celebrating what they're doing.

The rise of discourses of the independent learner, implicated in policy developments such as PDP (Clegg 2004, Leathwood 2006, David and Clegg 2008) locates responsibility for writing development primarily with the individual student, as part of a self-audit of 'training' needs. Mike's phrase "as necessary" suggests that writing has been shunted into a space where it is up to students whether their writing receives any attention, and thus is an option rather than as being integral to disciplinary learning.

It is possible to discern in these arrangements a conceptual wedge being driven between academic study in the discipline on one hand, and writing as part of a 'personal' curriculum on the other. Thus, although students' writing development may be dealt with by academic disciplinary staff, writing issues are shifted away from disciplinary spaces, becoming part of a support or pastoral care mechanism triggered by students asking for help (much as in the example above of Emma (RGU) as "personal tutor" helping panicking students with an assignment they don't understand). In the process student writing is separated from disciplinary knowledge-making and learning, and the work involved perceived as emotional *rather than* intellectual labour. This is not to imply that the institutional re-location of student writing as a pastoral care issue always dictated the practice of individual teacher participants in all situations. Mike (NU1), for example,

took a pro-active, integrated approach on at least one module, bringing academic writing as personal meaning-making into the Geography curriculum itself by introducing the new academic genre of a personal structured field diary as an assessed text. He co-ordinated with writing specialists to support the whole student group to use personal experience effectively within academic writing (see Tuck 2015). However, Mike describes his practice in this module specifically as “innovative” and an “experiment”. He therefore consciously distinguishes this initiative from other “as necessary”-style writing routines in his context. Gender was not necessarily an explicit framing for participants’ notion of writing as a personal and pastoral, as opposed to academic, issue; however, analysis across the data as a whole supports the view that a gendered discourse of ‘caring’ in higher education is an active ingredient in the feminising of work around student writing.

## **Discussion**

An understanding of the gendering of work around student writing emerged as the study progressed through methodological attention to the perspectives and experiences of participants, and to the discourses they drew on in interviews and in the course of their everyday practices around students’ writing. Gender was not an *a priori* guiding focus of the research. However, discourses emerging in the course of the study throw some light on the ways in which gender might be shaping and be being shaped by academic teachers’ practices, experiences and perspectives of work around student writing. Findings do not support conclusions about how these discourses and practices might have a differential impact on women and men. However, the analysis does point to the need

for further exploration of the gendering of writing work in the disciplines in the UK, and the consequences for staff and students.

Notions of 'care' and 'the personal' in academic work are highly problematic in terms of gender, status and power. Data analysis in this paper points to the potentially gendered nature of writing-related work for academic teachers because it is time-consuming, potentially emotionally demanding and can involve a lot of conversation and interpersonal engagement, things which have often been associated with female labour and with 'nurture'. Work with students' writing and their texts often becomes mingled with home life, is often understood as occupying a feminised boundary zone at the edge of 'proper' academic teaching work, and is sometimes experienced as stigmatising in terms of professional identity for academics while also potentially infantilising students. These factors combine to push writing work out of the disciplines towards marginal writing-designated spaces in ways which are often understood in terms of a gendered division of labour between 'rational/masculine' activities such as lecturing and researching and 'emotional/feminine' ones such as the provision of personal 'support'. Comments by some participants in the study echo the stance of Clegg (2010), Lynch (2009, 2010), Butterwick and Dawson (2005), and others who call for a re-evaluation of caring as integral to academic work and identity. The tendency for work with students as writers to be relocated in quasi-disciplinary and 'pastoral' spaces such as PDP or in student support units outside the disciplines is a particularly relevant site of debate here, and works against this re-evaluation and reintegration.

The intensification of workloads for academics in contemporary universities prompts individuals to re-evaluate what they do and what is important: individuals who care about working with student writers resource this work personally from their own funds of time and energy where they can, resulting in multiple and diverse practices. Those who make themselves more accessible or are positioned as being so by colleagues and students and through institutional role allocation are liable to find themselves doing the bulk of the unacknowledged and time-consuming ‘shadow work’ involved in working with student writers and their texts. Thus the burden falls unevenly, the work is undervalued and provision remains highly variable for students. Moreover, even where work around student writing is carried out by academic teachers in the disciplines, discourses of writing as personal skills development, understood in terms of individual students’ overwhelming ‘needs’ not only risks framing students as being in deficit (Haggis 2006), they also drive a separation between the intellectual labour of disciplinary teaching and learning and the labour associated with student writing, the latter being understood as a form of content-free emotional and pastoral support often expressed in feminised terms. Work with student writers and their texts is intrinsically both intellectual and emotional but because its intellectual component is often hidden, downgraded or ignored, in part through feminising discourses, this work is framed as personal rather than academic, and peripheral to the central endeavour of higher education.

From an academic literacies perspective, which views academic writing – like all writing – as deeply contextual and fundamentally connected with meaning-making in specific disciplines, such a separation between (valued) intellectual and (undervalued)

emotional labour is problematic, not only because writing work may be unfairly distributed amongst staff as a result, or because the attention students receive around their writing seeps into pastoral care spaces where it is framed as a remedial response to deficit. There is also a major question raised about the role of writing in higher education. To treat writing as merely a personal issue to be dealt with by those who are paid to ‘care’ is to deny its role in teaching, learning and knowledge-making, and its role in the formation of student identities. Writing work which acknowledges writing (or any form of text production) as more than simply a transparent container for the conveyance of ideas by definition involves emotional *and* intellectual labour, caring about students *and* about the discipline *as part of the same shared endeavour of meaning-making*. However, as data analysis in this paper has shown, the emotional and caring element of such labour is often occluded or under-resourced within disciplinary teachers’ work, or excluded from disciplinary activity, by being annexed in PDP or employability programmes for the ‘independent’ and ‘flexible’ learner, or through referral to “Auntie Floss down the road”. A reappraisal of the value of ‘care work’ around student writing as an intrinsic and valuable part of the academic teachers’ role may go some way towards counteracting the “hidden doxa” of “carelessness” (Lynch 2010) in contemporary higher education, with its potentially unfairly gendered outcomes. It also opens up the possibility of bringing disciplinary knowledge-making and academic writing back together, where they belong.

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<sup>i</sup> Transcriptions of interview talk are presented here using conventional orthography and punctuation. Author's insertions made for clarification are indicated in square brackets [ ]; omissions from original transcript are indicated using ...