Writing as a critical moment in professional discourse

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Abstract

Written texts mediate action and serve as accounts of action in most contemporary professional domains. Echoing Candlin’s call for applied and social linguists to explore ‘critical moments’ in discourse, I argue that ‘writing’ constitutes just such a critical moment because of its contested position in professional domains and the dominant ideology underpinning writing evident both in ‘intellectual’ (academic researcher) and ‘expert’ (professional) orientations. A key challenge is to find ways of understanding writing which are not constrained by existing ‘intellectual’ and ‘expert’ orientations and which can contribute to useable knowledge for professional practice.

I draw on specific examples from ethnographically oriented research projects with professionals in two domains (academia and social work) to illustrate how a dominant ideology of writing is enacted. This enactment is explored further by focusing on ICT-mediated ‘expert systems’ in social work, illustrating how an increasingly used, specific technology of writing is impacting professional practice. I conclude by considering the difficulties and possibilities of collaboratively building useable knowledge about writing for professional practice.
1 Preamble: Key commitments in work at the interface of applied linguistics and professional practice

I begin by briefly outlining what I see as five key commitments in Chris Candlin’s work towards building a field at the interface of applied linguistics and professional practice. The five commitments I list below, and which I see as core to building a meaningful inter-relational (Sarangi and Candlin 2010) praxis space, will be ‘familiar’ but are also worth ‘making strange’ (Agar 1996), to remind us of the kind of work we are engaging in and why.

(1) To engage in empirical language focused research and analysis and continually to ask: what is going on? here? now? how? why? This commitment is evident in much of Candlin’s extensive authorial and editorial work over some 50 years, in the areas of education, medicine, law and health (for overviews, see Jones 2013; White et al. 2019).

(2) To work with the notion of language-as-discourse, connecting empirical analysis of specific instances of discourse with larger social practices. This point is repeatedly made in Candlin’s work: ‘descriptions and interpretations, focused as they are on the micro of the interaction order, need connecting with the macro conditions of the institutional’ (Candlin 2009: 7; see also Coupland et al. 2001; Candlin et al. 2017).

(3) To approach phenomena being explored – including the processes through which we as researchers come to apprehend such phenomena – from a critical and reflexive position. Researcher reflexivity is seen as central to meaningful research practice (see, e.g., Sarangi and Candlin 2001, 2003).
To build collaborative practice and knowledge between applied linguists and professionals. This involves being willing to work beyond disciplinary/expertise boundaries and being open to re-articulating frames of reference (see, e.g., Candlin and Sarangi 2004; Candlin 2008; Candlin and Candlin 2016; White et al. 2019).

To generate useful/usable knowledge and collaboratively to explore what constitutes useful knowledge. This is presented as an ongoing question and challenge raised in many publications (see, e.g., Candlin 2009; Sarangi and Candlin 2010).

The five commitments are useful as a heuristic for reflection and I will return briefly to these at the end of the paper, with specific regard to challenges for ongoing research and praxis centring on professional writing.

2 The focus and structure of this paper

My specific interest in this paper is writing – what it is, what it does and how it contributes to, shapes and constitutes professional practice. Throughout the paper I will use examples from two domains of research that I have been involved in for a substantial period of time. The first centres on academics’ professional academic writing, specifically, academic writing for publication (see, e.g., Lillis and Curry 2010, 2015; Curry and Lillis 2018), while the second centres on social workers’ professional writing, focusing on two projects, respectively on case notes 1 (Lillis 2017; Lillis and Rai 2011, 2012) and the broad range of everyday professional writing (Lillis et al. 2017, 2020; Leedham et al. 2019

http://www.writinginsocialwork.com/). Research in both domains has involved an ethnographic orientation to research, using multiple methods of data collection and analysis involving ‘thick participation’ (Sarangi 2006, 2007) and ‘thick description’ (Geertz 1973) in
order to gain rich descriptions of writing practices. Brief details of the studies are outlined in Table 1.

<Insert Table 1>

The categorisation of ‘profession/al’ is highly contested in both domains, often construed as being at odds with the interests and identities of academics and social workers; for example, the term is often associated with managerialist, neoliberal regimes rather than the more altruistic goals of scholarly endeavour or the socially progressive interests of social workers (for discussions relating to academics, see Archer 2008; Ibrahim et al. 2011; Sancha and Barbarà-i-Molinero 2016; for social workers, see Cree 2008; Jones 2013). Nevertheless, the work in which academics and social workers engage can at some level be described as ‘professional’ – and research about their practice of relevance to other professional domains – for a number of reasons: the work of both groups involves particular areas of expertise, underpinned by particular values; both groups are required to engage in specific institutionally circumscribed activities; and the legitimacy of members of each group to engage in practice is codified in the form of specific qualifications, promotions criteria and ethical governance (for critical discussion of categorisations of ‘profession/als’, see Saks 2012).

In both domains, writing and the written text are central to everyday practice, albeit in different ways. In academics’ practice, the academic text written for publication is in a significant sense a core professional goal (see Lillis and Curry 2010; for discussion of academics’ other literacy practices, see Lea and Stierer 2011; Tusting et al. 2019). In social work practice, in contrast, the goal is the production of services in relation to needs and risks: written texts are not the goal but they mediate and drive action forward. Given the
differences, it may seem questionable to juxtapose these domains in an exploration of professional writing. Yet research findings and insights from both domains illustrate the prevalence of a dominant ideology attached to writing, helping to account for why writing is construed as a problem (that is, a framing which centres on what is wrong with professionals’ texts and their writing practices) rather than opening up a debate about the problematics of writing, a deeper exploration of the nature and function of writing in, and as, professional practice. This paper seeks to contribute to the latter.

Furthermore, the paper is organised around a distinction between the ‘intellectual’, understood here as the academic researcher involved in the academic study of language and writing (here, me), and the ‘professional’, understood here as the academics and the social workers engaging in writing related to their professional expertise and practices. The distinction between ‘intellectual’ and ‘expert’ is of course far from clear-cut (see Shils 1968; Sarangi 2012), a key example being the shifting (levels of) the intellectual-academic’s emic and etic positionalities in the course of engaging in the research process over time (for discussions, see Lillis 2008). However, the distinction is useful to signal that there is generally a difference in orientations to writing from intellectual and expert perspectives. Most obviously, the intellectual’s expertise with regard to writing includes a raft of ‘coding’ and ‘highlighting’ practices (Goodwin 1994) drawn from academic traditions such as rhetoric, (socio)linguistics and literacy studies; in contrast, the expert (in this paper the academic and the social worker) draws on a ‘knowing-in-practice’ (Schön1983: viii) involving a deep implicit understanding of the purpose of the writing that takes place in and for the workplace, including the work that texts are intended to achieve and where they fall short. Collaboration between ‘intellectuals’ and ‘experts’ to explore the problematics of writing is potentially productive: the intellectual’s specific expertise may help articulate and give legitimacy to professional concerns about writing, while the expert’s implicit knowledge
in action and expert practice may challenge and/or give rise to new intellectual categories and languages of description. Working together may help bring to bear articulations of the phenomenon under scrutiny – in this instance, writing – which may lead to re-articulations or specific actions. However, it is also important to highlight that whilst there are often differences between intellectual and expert orientations to writing, I argue that there is also a dominant ideology that is often shared across both which is unhelpful in articulating the problematics of professional writing. I discuss this ideology in Section 3 below.

The paper is structured as follows. I begin by arguing that writing constitutes a ‘critical moment’ (Candlin 1989, 1997) in professional discourse and therefore warrants serious attention. I foreground the notion of ‘writtenness’, which is used to encapsulate both the material practices of inscription (e.g. use of pen and paper and digital technologies) as well as the ideologies nested in and underpinned by such inscription practices (Lillis 2013: 113; see Turner 2018 for comprehensive articulation). I then explore some specific instances of writing from both academic and social work research to illustrate the dominant ideology of writing in action. This is followed by a discussion of ICT-mediated ‘expert systems’ (Sarangi 2016) in social work to illustrate how a specific (increasingly used) technology of writing, underpinned by a dominant ideology of writtenness, is impacting professional practice. I conclude by considering the challenges of making use of knowledge based on an alternative orientation towards writing in professional domains.

3 Why writing is a critical moment in professional discourse

The idea that we should focus our attention on critical or crucial moments in practice as a way of gaining some deeper insight into the nature of a particular phenomenon is a long-standing tradition across a number of social science disciplines. As a method to guide researcher observation and practitioner reflection it has proved particularly valuable in
education (e.g. Myhill and Warren 2005) and the health professions (e.g. Vachon and LeBlanc 2011).

Candlin uses the terms both crucial and critical to focus specifically on communication and to argue for where our attention as researchers of language and communication should be directed (bold added):

\[
\text{we should address our talents as explorers and explainers to those texts which evidence crucial moments in discourse where participants may be placed at social risk during communication. (Candlin 1989: viii)}
\]

and

\[
\text{Critical moments [are] where personal and community matters of concern are critically evidenced and in play, typically matters surrounding issues of rights, powers, claims and responsibilities---. Critical moments [are] where discursive (in)competence is at a premium. (Candlin 1997:x)}
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Foregrounding different dimensions to such cruciality or criticality (risk and significance and rights, power and discursive (in)competence) is an important move in identifying what should be the focus of empirical attention, but also in anchoring analysis of specific instances of discourse to larger social processes (see, e.g., Candlin 1997; Candlin et al. 2017).

Empirically, the notion has been widely taken up at a micro level of discourse, that is to focus on specific, often troublesome, moments of (mainly) spoken interaction. Whilst also finding this notion useful at the micro level and indeed focusing on specific instances of writing below, I also want to use the notion of ‘critical moment’ at a meso-discourse level, to refer to writing as a particular discoursal phenomenon that is highly significant but troublesome in
professional domains. I am arguing that writing at this meso level constitutes a critical moment, of importance to both intellectuals and experts, for three reasons.

(1) Writing plays a significant yet highly ambiguous role in contemporary professional practice. Writing is core to practice but is often institutionally or professionally invisible, mainly becoming visible when identified as a ‘problem’. (In this respect it is interesting to note that the starting point of becoming involved in the two professional domains discussed in this paper was a request for help with a ‘problem’: in the case of academics, the request was in response to concerns concerned about the ‘English’ used in writing for publication, while the research on professional social work writing began in response to a local authority concerned about the ‘quality’ of case notes in adult care teams).

(2) A deficit orientation towards writing and a reductionist approach to written texts is evident in all public spheres including professional domains. Problems with writing tend to be construed as the fault of writers (they/their writing is ‘not good enough’, ‘not fast enough’ or simply ‘not enough’) and the primary solutions tend to be prescriptive and at text level. Intellectually, in studies of professional written discourse, there has been a strong preoccupation with the production of typologies of texts types and genres (for discussions, see Bhatia 2002, 2012): this typological approach is strongly evident in the many professional guides on ‘how to’ write any number of institutionally labelled professional text types (as evidenced by a quick online search on ‘how to write a xxx’). Furthermore, in both intellectual and expert domains there are a cluster of (usually unstated) assumptions around what constitutes ‘writing’, underpinned by notions of ‘standard’ (acceptable/legitimised) language and recognisable textual ‘error’. This lack of a descriptive language for describing written language outside of such frames is strongly evident even in work which sets out to challenge such categories (for discussion, see Lillis and McKinney 2013). This deficit articulation of writing feeds into reductionist, rather than contingency, orientations to professional
communication in general (see Sarangi and Candlin [2010: 4] on ‘dogma of communication skills’).

(3) A particularly strong normative ideology underpins both intellectual and expert orientations to writing – what it is, does, should be. This ideology underpins a deficit orientation to writing and writers outlined in Section 2 and presents significant challenges when trying to open up exploration of the phenomenon and to reach some meaningful understandings about implications for practice. Whilst writing has been shown to be multiple, the ideology around writing is relentlessly singular: what Street (1984) calls the ‘autonomous’ view of literacy – that writing can be construed as one unitary phenomenon with universal consequences – prevails in both intellectual and expert orientations. What this autonomous view means in practice is that in both intellectual and expert orientations there is a particularly strong ‘closet prescriptivism’ (Cameron 2012 [1995]) with regard to writing, with specific set of a priori values, such as transparency (writing as a straightforward way of using language to record reality), transactionality (writing as a simple way of transfer of information and meaning between writer and reader) and comprehensiveness (an assumption that the/a written text can provide a complete record of reality) (see Lillis and McKinney 2013; Lillis 2017; Turner 2018). This normative ideology gets in the way of articulating the problematics of writing and of opening up debate about what writing is and can do – and what it cannot.

To open up debate about writing, the notion of ‘writtenness’ – encapsulating both the material practices of inscription as well as the ideologies enacted and underpinned by such inscription practices – helpfully provides us with some distancing from taken-for-granted assumptions often lurking around uses of the term ‘writing’ and is therefore used for this purpose throughout the paper.
4 Examples of ideologies around writing in action

In this section I want briefly to illustrate how normative ideologies play out in routine professional practice, by focusing on two specific instances of writing practice in academic and social work domains. The discussion is necessarily brief – details are provided of sources of fuller analysis – but serve to illustrate routine writing practices as well as typical orientations to the written text.

4.1 Multilingual academics submitting an English medium article to journal for publication in English

The following example is from a larger study exploring reviewers’ orientations to language when evaluating academic journal articles. Consider Extract 1, written by a group of multilingual scholars from a journal article submitted for review, and the reviewer feedback in Extract 2.

Extract 1

Yet since modal density can be accomplished successfully or un成功fully in different ways, depending on the strategies displayed by the storyteller, the interpreter or both of them as an aggregate, the effect, in terms of literary experience, may move along a continuum between positive and negative implications for hearing and Deaf children.

Extract 2

The sentences are too long. Perhaps it is personal preference, but I find the writing style of this/these author(s) to be very flowery and containing an excess of verbiage.
The orientation in the response or uptake (Lillis and Curry 2015) of the expert, in this case the reviewer, is clearly normative; there is a textual focus, with the reviewer working with assumptions about what academic writing in English should/should not be. A deficit is implied, focusing on what the writers are doing ‘wrong’, e.g. ‘the sentences are too long’, ‘flowery’. As this example illustrates and the larger study shows, reviewers (even those working in critical approaches to language) tend to work from rigid evaluation regimes, in this case those governing English medium academic article publishing, echoing a set of well-used notions in intellectual studies of writing which include:

– a normative orientation to rhetorical genres, by assuming that the academic journal article is a homogenous, stable phenomenon;
– binary orientations towards language and written discourse, in terms of spoken versus written, standard versus non-standard, ‘native’ versus non-native’ English; and
– binary orientations towards the rational versus aesthetic in terms of academic ‘style’, with the former given legitimacy over the latter, by working with an assumption that written academic discourse is (and should be) overwhelmingly a rational rather than an aesthetic phenomenon – although reviewers’ practices clearly signal that they are paying attention to the aesthetics of written academic discourse, e.g. ‘flowery’, and therefore perhaps grappling for an alternative frame of reference, such aesthetically oriented comments are not made visible as a legitimate discourse of evaluation but are rather anchored to a rational orientation.⁴

If we stay within such frames we may fail to understand the phenomenon we are trying to understand. If we extend our gaze beyond the text, through an ethnographic orientation which involves drawing on the expert’s perspectives (in this instance the academic authors),
multiple drafts of texts and the trajectory of a paper as it moves through submission journals, we develop a different understanding about the practices of production and uptake of academic writing for publication globally.

An analysis of the trajectory of this text through submission to two journals and corresponding rounds of reviews and editorial comment across two years found the following. Journal 1 rejected the paper (the reviewer extract above is from one of the reviewers of this journal). Following the subsequent submission to Journal 2 (of the paper almost entirely in the same version), the paper was accepted. Some reviewers in both journals praised the paper as being ‘well written’. Other reviewers in both journals made negative comments on style, writing, language, English. The key difference between the two journals was that the editor of Journal 1 warranted her rejection by indirectly referring to the concerns about language and style, made by the reviewer, an extract from whom was included above. In contrast, the editor of Journal 2 signalled the need for further ‘language work’ but did not use this to warrant rejection of the paper and in fact clearly saw such language work as, in part, the responsibility of the journal.

The risk of failing to shift towards a lens which goes beyond a priori assumptions about English medium academic journal articles and, in particular, normative orientations towards written language, English and style, is that we fail to see, or in Bourdieu’s terms, ‘misrecognise’ (Bourdieu 2000 [1977]) what is going on. The phenomenon surfacing here is not that there are ‘problems’ with language/rhetoric’that need to be resolved by authors (usually by being directed towards a ‘native’ English speaker – see Lillis and Curry 2015) but rather, more fundamentally, that ideologies of English, language, writing, style nested within Enlightenment values of clarity and rationality shape the uptake of written academic papers in complex ways. There are profound ethical risks to such misrecognition: in this instance, we
may fail to make visible how evaluation practices around academic writing are shaping opportunities for participation, production and exchange of knowledge globally.

Through focusing on the trajectories of entextualisation – that is, the processes and practices whereby texts come into existence (for discussion, see Maybin 2017), rather than on single, completed texts and avoiding a priori assumptions – other possible articulations of the problematics of ‘writing for publication’ come into view. These include:

– the contested nature of evaluation;
– the different patterns and ideologies of readers’ responses to texts, in this case those of reviewers;
– some appreciation of the significance attached to what counts as ‘good writing’ and acceptable ‘style’ in English medium articles and the consequences of such judgements on the evaluation of contributions to knowledge; and
– some appreciation of the different orientations to written ‘language work’ and where responsibility lies for such work.

4.2 Social workers writing case notes

The following example is from a study exploring case notes written by social workers in Adult Services (Lillis 2017). The extract and summary discussion is intended to illustrate commonly voiced practices and concerns. Consider Extract 3 from ‘case notes’ written by a social worker and Extract 4, the summary details of concerns by the manager.

Extract 3
John’s son and John are managing very well and John is happy to be at home. The lunch time and tea time calls are not really required during the week as John’s son is managing to transfer John to the toilet and change his pad.

**Extract 4**

Concerns about the ‘quality’ of case notes, lack of comprehensive detail and lack a professional view.

The orientation in uptake of the expert-manager is normative: there is a textual focus, with the reader working with assumptions about what case notes should/should not be. A deficit is implied, echoing repeated concerns that social workers are not writing enough (or sometimes too much) and that much content is inadequate in some way. Here the case note might also be considered inadequate from the perspective of the specific concern about a lack of professional view: there is, for example, little on-record explicit professional evaluation of the situation, and the use of hedging (i.e. ‘not really required’) could be construed as backgrounding the social worker’s professional voice. When reading and evaluating case notes, managers and inspectors tend to work from quite rigid evaluation regimes governing what counts as a good case note or ‘comprehensive record’, drawing on a set of well-used notions, which are also widely used in intellectual orientations to writing. These include:

- rigid notions about what counts as a specific text type or ‘genre’, by assuming ‘case notes’ to be a discrete and homogenous genre – on analysis they can be more accurately described as a ‘multi-genre’, constituted in one institutional system, of 53 differently labelled text types (Lillis 2017);
– relatedly, rigid notions about what counts as a ‘complete text’, by working with a
notion of completeness which is core to the conception of the ‘written text’ across
writing research traditions. Boundaries are set around instances of inscription to name
these as ‘writing’. Here the notion of complete(d) text maps on to institutional
expectations around the complete or comprehensive record but may mask what the
phenomenon of case notes is, and indeed what it means to be ‘comprehensive’.

If we stay within such frames we may fail to articulate the phenomenon we are trying to
understand. If we extend our gaze a little, through an ethnographic orientation which involves
interviews with the social worker, detailed observations of the production of case notes over
an eight-hour period and the collection of the written texts produced during this time, we may
develop a different understanding about the meaning and practice of writing in everyday
social work.

From interviews with the specific social work writer of the extract above, we gleam
traces of her orientation to the production of the case note as one moment of writing, nested
within the production activity of other written texts, and in her imagining of meeting future
needs, as shown in Extract 5 (previously published in Lillis 2017).

**Extract 5**

As I’m writing the case note I’m thinking about the future aren’t I? I’m thinking about
future outcomes, I’m thinking about what might or might not be wrong, thinking
about family. You’ve got all that going on in your head haven’t you? The dynamics of
that case. – Sometimes, because in your head you’re already one step ahead, aren’t
you? So while you’re getting that information you’re thinking ‘right well the next
thing we need to do is this, this and this, so I need more information to enable me to do that.’

From the eight-hour observation it is clear that case notes are produced alongside several other differently institutionally labelled texts – a funding request, a care plan – with the ‘writing of the record’ traversing all three.

The risk of failing to shift towards a lens which goes beyond *a priori* assumptions is that, once again, we may fail to understand – that is, ‘misrecognise’ (Bourdieu 2000 [1977]) – what is going on: here this is not an issue of ‘inadequate’ or poor ‘case note’ writing but of the ways in which the ‘written record’ occurs across a ‘text cluster’, to ensure that services are provided. The ethical risk to such misrecognition is that we fail to make visible the ways in which current evaluation practices (of the case note) are misrepresenting where, how and why writing occurs. This evaluation (and auditing) may be negatively shaping social workers’ practices and ultimately provision of services.

Through focusing on instances of practice and social worker perspectives, particular articulations of the problematics of social work writing come into view. These include:

– a deeper insight into how a particular institutionally-labelled text type, here case notes, is positioned within the textual world of social work;

– some appreciation of when writing occurs, in which material conditions and using which technologies and why; and

– an insight that writing occurs across clusters of texts rather in single, discrete institutionally labelled texts, raising questions about analytical practices (e.g. intellectual frames for analysing writing) and evaluative practices (e.g. how particular texts are construed and evaluated within professional evaluation regimes).
5 Writing, experts and expert systems

Thus far I have used specific instances of routine professional writing to illustrate why writing constitutes a critical moment in professional discourse and therefore merits our close attention. I have been focusing on how in broad terms the dominant ideology around writing may obscure understandings and insights (intellectual and expert) about the nature and consequences of writing; and although never straightforward, reaching some understanding of what is going on rather than what we assume to be going on is important in any attempt to explore the problematics of writing in professional domains.

In this section, I turn my attention to a key shift that has taken place in most professional domains over the past 20 years: the introduction of pan-organisational ICT (Information and Communications Technology) systems. Here I focus in particular on the relationship between writing – more specifically writtenness – and ICT-mediated expert systems in social work.

Sarangi (2016) usefully contrasts experts with expert systems in the following way. Simply put, the expert is an accomplished professional who

no longer relies on rules, guidelines or maxims, intuitive grasp of situations based on deep tacit understanding, analytic approaches used only in novel situations or when problems occur, with a vision of what is possible. (Sarangi 2016: 378)

Expert systems, meanwhile, are ‘knowledge-processing and knowledge-generating automated machines’ such as ‘screening programmes, clinical trials, […] test results’ (Sarangi 2016: 381), and can be contrasted with ‘technologies of articulation’, such as ‘electronic patient records’ and ‘treatment regimes’ (Sarangi 2016: 382). With regard to social work in the UK,
the most obvious and largest expert systems mediating practice are the ICT systems which came into widespread use in the mid-2000s (see White et al. 2010 for discussion of introduction of ICT systems into social work). The systems not only function as recording archives whereby information can be shared between professionals within agencies; they also play a powerful role in structuring workflow through templated documentation, in many cases with stipulated timelines and deadlines.

Figure 1 shows screenshots from the webpages of two widely used commercially available ICT systems in social work.

<Insert Figure 1>

A key point that Sarangi makes about expert systems is that they derive in part – are built – from expert knowledge. The brief extracts in Figure 1 indicate that some of the claims for the systems clearly reflect professional social work expertise and values: there is explicit mention of an influential social work review, the Munro Report (Department of Education 2011), and social-work professional values are indexed by the discourse: holistic, intuitive, integrated and capture the whole journey, as well as a well-documented social worker desire to save time spent on recording. However, as White et al. (2010) discuss, the introduction and centrality of such ICT-mediated expert systems is not a simply an enactment or instantiation of existing professional knowledge and practice, and here I want to reflect specifically on one core dimension: the writtenness of the ICT systems and its impact on professional practice.

Currently, all social workers have to use ICT systems. Figure 2 shows screenshots of examples of the interface social workers routinely write into.

<Insert Figure 2>
In early discussions of ICT-mediated expert systems, a distinction was made between those supporting professional practice – that is, those within the control of the practitioner-expert – and those replacing professional practice (e.g. Schuerman 1987). An example illustrating the professional-in-control end of the spectrum is Figure 3, which shows a screenshot of a drop-down menu for case notes. Categories of case notes are built (prescribed) into the system; however, the design allows the content of case notes to stay within the social worker’s control, with the social worker writing into a blank (free) space. Both the production and uptake (reading/further use) of case notes involves expert active involvement (of social workers, managers etc.). Figure 4, in contrast, illustrates an automated response, a budgetary calculation based on needs as entextualised into a templated form by the social worker.

Automated responses (whether generated in the moment of social worker entextualization or at a later moment by a second department, e.g. finance) may clearly be useful; the algorithm for calculating budget may be an obvious example of the time saving promised by ICT providers.

However, in order for such automated responses to be generated – in this case funds to be allocated – a considerable amount of writing is required: for example, an Assessment of Adult Needs form, of the type illustrated in Figure 4, involves some 21 sections, each with a substantial number of subsections, some of which include tick box responses and all of which require substantial descriptive text work in the blank boxes provided. The overall result from

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the social workers’ perspective therefore may not be that of saving time, or more generally, of maintaining meaningful control; in fact, a widespread criticism from social workers is that the requirement to write into the complex documentation ICT system in order to secure services takes more of their work time than they consider acceptable (see Lillis et al. 2020). Comments from a social worker in Adult Services provided in Extract 6 (from the WiSP dataset6) illustrates some of the frustration.

**Extract 6**

We’ve got to have it [ICT system], we’ve got to have something to use. It makes me sound like a right anti-technology, I’m not at all. I do my best with it. But I do think it has a limit – I find getting things ‘done smartly’, or more quickly, when you start bureaucratising things, it then takes it away from you because you can’t go to a manager and say, as in perhaps older days if you like, ‘I need such and such for this person’, and they say, ‘Oh right, just get it back to me with this, that.’ Now we’ve got to, right, fill this in, fill that in, send it to this person, then that person’s got to be actually looking at it, come back to you with that, and then you’ve got to do something else. I’m like, ‘whoa!’

The nature and consequences of the introduction of ICT expert systems for social work practice has been the focus of some research (see for example, Hall et al. 2010) and certainly demands more attention. For the purposes of this paper, focusing on writing, there are several quite obvious but generally overlooked key points I wish to make:

- the ICT-mediated expert systems used in social work are fundamentally systems designed to require writing – written entextualised responses;
- writing here is not only a medium or mode of the ICT-mediated expert system; it constitutes this particular expert system, and one key consequence is that the written record becomes treated as the practice: in the words of many social workers, ‘If it’s not written down, it didn’t happen’ (Lillis et al. 2017), and ‘written down’ here means entextualised in the ICT system; and

- the ICT-expert system is not only constituted by writing but is anchored to dominant ideologies about writing/writtenness, (as outlined in Section 3): transparency (the idea that writing is a straightforward way of using language to record events, histories, perspectives), transactionality (writing as a simple way of recording information, the significance and meaning of which can be transferred between writers and readers via an ICT system) and comprehensiveness (an assumption that the/a written text – and in the case of the ICT system, a large archive of texts built out of templated designs, can provide a complete record of the realities of people, events, histories etc.).

6 Drawing to a conclusion

In this paper I have tried to shift attention away from the problem with writing to a focus on the problematics of writing, in professional domains. Focusing on two domains, with particular attention to the domain of social work, I have argued that normative ideologies underpinning discussions around communication are particularly rigid when it comes to writing. Coming to a richer understanding of writing is important for a number of reasons:

- ideologies about what counts as good writing – whether these foreground language, writing, style –are highly consequential. They shape the production and uptake of written texts, influencing how these are evaluated and acted on;
the amount of time spent on writing is increasing across all professional domains. In social work, a domain which does not have writing as its goal, it is estimated that professionals are spending between 50%–80% of their work time on writing (Lillis et al. 2020). The increasing amount of time spent on the particular professional academic writing practice illustrated in this paper, that of academic writing for publication, is well documented (see for example Curry and Lillis 2018), as is time spent on writing in academic practice more generally (see, e.g., Tusting et al. 2019);

ICT-mediated expert systems are the dominant institutional technology for writing in many professional domains. These systems are constituted by particular ideologies of writtenness and are impacting on professionals’ practice in profound ways. Some specific ways in which ICT systems function as expert systems in social work have been illustrated in this paper, but the use of ICT expert systems to drive professional practice is increasing across all domains; and

the (institutionally legitimised) written record is increasingly the only legitimised representation of expert work and means of driving action. Privileging the written record is impacting what counts as expert knowledge and practice, what it is and how it is legitimised and recognised (an obvious example, with regard to academics, is that their expert knowledge and practice is measured by the number of publications; with regard to social workers, their expert knowledge and practice is increasingly only legitimised if entextualised as a written account). The ways in which the written text is evaluated is often experienced as an obstruction rather than a facilitator of professional goals, hindering the production and circulation of knowledge (in the case of academics) or the assessment of needs and provision of services (in the case of social work, see Leigh et al. 2019 for visual representation).
Of course, what is not at issue here is the potential value of writing (understood as both a practice and as texts) to professional practice. However, the dominant ideology underpinning writing, the significant increase in the centrality of written record and the rise of ICT-mediated expert systems in the workplace are shaping practice in ways which are often at odds with professionals’ interest and commitments. And of course, ideologies of writing are not separate from ideologies underpinning and driving institutional practice more generally: “If institutions see people as elements in a pipeline, then writing will be seen as a conduit, perfectly suited to do the work of transactional, neoliberal institutional discourse” (Thesen, pers. comm 2020).8

The challenge for praxis is how to generate knowledge that is useful to professionals in everyday practice: not all intellectual knowledge is necessarily usable, as signalled by Sarangi’s distinction between ‘discovery’ and ‘usefulness’ (Sarangi 2012: 15). Furthermore, reimagining writing both from intellectual and expert perspectives involves a process of ongoing debate, reflection and collaboration, and whilst complex and time-consuming, there is clearly both a strong imperative and significant interest in such endeavours. One obvious task is to design resources for practice which avoid reductionist approaches to writing, but rather build on what professionals do and want to do with writing, (with regard to scholars’ writing, we have attempted to do this by drawing closely on research on actual practice – see Lillis and Curry 2015; with regard to social work, we have collaborated with social workers to build an open access resource called Writing in Social Work Practice9).

A key strategy is to work not only directly with professionals, but with multiple publics and in different ways. Thus, with regard to academic writing, we have worked with editorial boards, as well as commercial translation companies (see for example, Lillis et al. 2010; Academic Language Experts 2020) in attempting to dislodge the default deficit orientation. As for social workers, we have worked to build debate with regulatory bodies,
professional representatives and union representatives, as well as collaborating with social
workers to build a shared articulation of the problematics of writing (e.g. Balkow and Lillis
2019).

Coda
I began by listing what I see as core commitments in Chris Candlin’s work at the interface of
applied linguistics and professional practice. Here I offer reflections on these commitments
with specific reference to the study of writing.

(1) **To engage in empirical language-focused research and analysis and continually ask:**
*what is going on? here? now? how? why?*
I see this as core work, particularly given the strong ideological assumptions that seem to
always underpin any discussion about writing. The slippage seems to be almost immediate
towards what people *should* be doing, rather than focusing on what people are doing and
why. As Hymes stated: ‘In general, many generalizations about the consequences of writing
and the properties of speaking make necessities out of possibilities’ (Hymes 1996: 40).

(2) **To work with the notion of language-as-discourse, connecting empirical analysis of
specific instances of discourse with larger social practices**
Attention to specific instances of writing is crucial for opening up meanings about writing in
specific professional contexts, and must necessarily be explored these with ‘macro conditions
of the institutional’ (Candlin 2009: 7). Such ‘macro’ conditions are both material (illustrated
for example in this paper with particular reference to ICT systems) and ideological
(illustrated with reference to institutional orientations to writing in both social work and
academic domains).
(3) **To approach phenomena being explored – including the processes through which we as researchers come to apprehend such phenomena – from a critical and reflexive position**

This is an ongoing challenge, given, as I have discussed, the powerful default orientations towards writing and the highly normative language of description available to us. Using words like *writtenness*, *inscription* and *entextualization* provide some distancing from the assumptions that seem stubbornly anchored to ‘writing’. But even researchers who are working to offer alternative notions, such as Blommaert’s (2005, 2010) *heterography*, *peripheral normativity* and *grassroots literacy*, or Canagarajah’s (2011) *meshing*, *mixing* and *shuttling* still seem unable to avoid the frame of ‘error’ (for discussion Lillis and McKinney 2013). We have much work to do as writing researchers (intellectuals) working with experts to shift this lens and build richer and usable languages of description.

(4) **To build collaborative practice and knowledge between applied linguists / writing researchers and professionals**

Successful collaboration involves long-term relationships (Roberts 2003) between intellectuals-academics and experts-professionals which has obvious methodological implications, not least that short or quick-turnaround research is not likely to be successful. In my experience of working across domains, many specific insights or even completely new direction in research emerge out of apparently ‘off the cuff’ (outside of the formal research process) conversations which have only become possible because of a shared way of talking/focusing over a period of time. I am also aware that I will have missed many insights because of being attached to my own research agenda and frames of reference.
(5) To generate useful/usable knowledge and to critically explore what constitutes useful knowledge

What we know of course is that what might be useful and usable at one specific moment, in one specific context will not be the same as at any other moment. Contingency is a core dimension to expert practice (Sarangi and Candlin 2010), which needs to be mirrored by attention to contingency in research and intellectual activity. Keeping contingency (rather than prescription) in the frame in engaging with the phenomena of writing presents significant challenges but is an intellectual and ethical imperative.

Notes

1 I use ‘applied linguistics’ as a broad term here to encompass a broad range of language-focused disciplinary areas, such as sociolinguistics and literacy studies.

2 These include anthropologically/ethnographically oriented traditions, e.g. Fraenkel (2001), Blommaert (2005, 2010) and Barber (2007); activity-theory oriented traditions, e.g. Bazerman and Paradis (1991); and New Literacy Studies, e.g. Barton et al. (2000), Lillis and Maybin (2017) and Tusting et al. (2019).

3 For full analysis of reviewer comments and ideologies relating to 95 text histories, see Lillis and Curry (2015).

4 For fuller discussion of the relationship between the hegemonic status of the rational in the evaluation of academic discourse relating to this specific example, see Lillis and Curry (2015), also Lillis (2011).

5 Whilst beyond the scope of this paper, writtenness includes attention to not only what/how writers write but also how readers read. For discussion of ‘smooth’ and ‘bumpy’ reads, see Turner (2018). For example of the value of ‘bumpy reads’ in multilingual academic papers, see Lillis (forthcoming).
Data archives can be accessed at the UK Data Service ReShare repository.

My focus in this paper has been on briefly illustrating aspects of an ICT system in social work. Whilst beyond the scope of this paper, ICT systems are increasingly shaping academics’ everyday professional practices, e.g. in monitoring performance, and in mediating publication practices through the use of commercially developed platforms.

My thanks to Lucia Thesen (http://www.ldg.uct.ac.za/ldg/staff/bio/lucia) for her critical reading of this paper and for articulating this connection so sharply. With her permission I quote her comment in full.


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References


https://www.aclang.com/blog/report-the-experience-of-non/


**Table 1:** Researching writing in two professional domains

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academics</th>
<th>Social workers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic writing for publication, PAW (with M.J.Curry)</td>
<td>Project 1 Case Notes in Adult Care (with Lucy Rai)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Primary focus</strong></td>
<td>Writing for publication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Contexts</strong></td>
<td>Hungary, Slovakia, Spain, Portugal (12 institutions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Duration</strong></td>
<td>18 years (core period 10 years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Core participants</strong></td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Core data</strong></td>
<td>field notes from observations based on 70 visits; text-focused interviews with academics (300); literacy history interviews (60); academics’ texts (2000); correspondence with gatekeepers (ca 700); email correspondence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1: ICT-mediated expert systems

Screenshot example 1

Single database: improved data quality and accuracy

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Screenshot example 2

What does the new case management system do differently?

Framework was developed alongside the national Review of Child Protection Services (the Munro Review). Framework allows the Children’s Social Work Service to capture the whole journey of the child, a key focus of the Munro review, in one place—including a summary page for each child, so that social workers and managers can have a quick overview of the work that has been done with the child and family.

The new system is also more intuitive for social workers to use; when certain tasks are completed, the system uses its workflows to suggest logical ‘next steps’, for example the statutory processes and reviews that need to happen during the child protection process, or after a child has become looked after.

The new system can pre-populate certain forms and assessments with details that practitioners have already entered when completing earlier pieces of work; this will save time and will mean that the same information is entered each time they start something.
Figure 2: Routine writing interfaces

Screenshot example 1

Screenshot example 2
**Figure 3:** Writing in open spaces

**Screenshot example**

![Screenshot example](image)

*Example of case note inscribed into blank space* (Identifying information removed)

Office Visit from [PERSON 1] and [PERSON 2]

[PERSON 1] and [PERSON 2] confirmed that they have an appointment to register [SU]'s death and will inform the bank, DWP, private pension etc.

I agreed that I will arrange for the collection of equipment. [PERSON 2] confirmed that the staff at [LOCATION 1] will enable access for this purpose.

I also advised that I will inform Home Care provider at [LOCATION 2].
Figure 4

Screenshot example 1

Screenshot example 2