

書評

Rowena Murray (2015).

Writing in Social Spaces: A Social Processes Approach to Academic Writing. London: Routledge.

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Rowena Murray in *Writing in Social Spaces*, brings an alternative to academic writing that is promoted by “the competitive, managerialist, capitalist discourse that purports to foster collaboration but is experienced as competition.” (p. 8) The aim of this book is stated to be twofold: 1) Analyzing the social components of writing 2) Proposing a connection between these social components and dealing with writing challenges, and in this way, rendering academic writing a more meaningful, pleasant and satisfying task. “Social writing” in the context of this study stands for: “creating conversations around productivity, that are specific to participants’ writing projects ... [and] talking about what we want to write.” (p. 3) The target readers are declared to be not only young researchers, but also those, who have already had much experience in academic writing and publishing, however, want to write in a more productive way. The book welcomes also the skeptics of social writing to read about a model for actively constructing their writing so as to make it fit in their lives. The overall argument of the book is that social writing works because it “outs” and supports the writing process. This argument might inspire ideas on the creation of private versus public or common knowledge, as academic writing is a means to create new knowledge. Not only the ends, that is knowledge, but also the means, that is the writing process can be made public and collective.

In terms of structure, after arguing for “making writing ‘social’” in the first chapter, Murray introduces the social writing alternative in its various formats in the following five chapters. These formats include: a formal academic writing course, social writing in workshops, structured writing retreat (including micro-groups and mini-retreats), and writing

meeting. The chapters on disengagement and containment theory, are complementary, because “disengagement” means an engagement with writing in this book and the author refers to the containment theory to explain how social writing functions well by containing writing-related anxiety and achieves disengagement by prioritizing writing over other tasks. Next, the meaning and role of leader as a facilitator in creating the favorable space for writing-oriented relationships--the lack of which is the gap that this book wants to fill in (p. 13)--during social writing is discussed. Finally, all these components of social writing are combined together in a “social writing framework” (p. 128), backed up by actual conversations of participants regarding these elements.

Another point of emphasis is that social writing is not only gathering together, talking while eating cakes and drinking coffee at a cozy place of retreat in Scotland. Rather, it is about following some structure and practices of this form of writing such as the presence of a leader, predetermined time slots, and measures for disengagement such as no internet connection during the structured writing retreat program. Such a structural approach to academic writing that the author calls “strategic engagement” also helps balance various competing tasks one has to do. Its difference from the management jargon of time management is that the former allows social support for one’s control of work and time, whereas the latter puts the burden on the pathetic individual, who is trying to do “multiple tasks at the same time” (p. 112), and therefore, stressed for being always out of time.

The time issue for writing is analyzed in the book with reference to the scarcity theory. Murray is not convinced by the excuse of scarcity of time for writing, and searches for a more positive outlook to the problem than such a problematic mindset. I don’t agree with this argument “that time and space are not the issue” (p. 101), because it disregards the fact that individuals are indeed overburdened with their workloads in the current system and neither time nor space are illusionary problems of a negative thinking. Nevertheless, at other parts of the book, the author makes clear the roles and responsibilities of institutions in intensifying or at least, not solving writing-anxiety. In addition to time and space, funding is part of the problem: “Participants often

fund them (retreats) out of their own pockets, but should they have to do so? Not everyone can afford that.” (p. 66) I think, it would be helpful, if Murray provided an exemplary cost statement along with the programmes and templates in the Appendix. Otherwise, the image of a retreat at a Scottish hotel beside a recent British movie, *Tamara Drewe* (2010) about unfolding events centered around people at a writing retreat in a farm at the beautiful countryside make me wonder, whether this is becoming a profitable sector in itself. On the other hand, the fact that one can apply social writing at home mitigates such criticism.

The theory and practice are well-balanced in strengthening the argument for social writing in the book. The quotes from previous participants to

her past work related to social writing are especially valuable in making explicit their first-hand experiences of social ways of tackling the academic writing problem. For example, a behavioral pattern that I observe among PhD students came up in the book as: “(Retreat) helps me to stop hiding behind reading - which means I don’t write.” (p. 112) As someone in her initial stages of academic writing, I have felt relieved to learn that it is not only me that is troubled by the task and the competition in the academic publishing market. The book’s influence on me is summarized by a retreat participant’s observation: “It makes getting started with writing task less intimidating.” (ibid.) I would suggest it primarily to all graduate students, who have a sense of unease about academic writing.