

‘Academic writing – a thing of beauty, a joy to behold’

Ronald Barnett

These days, around the world, academics are increasingly being expected to engage in research, the most significant ‘performance indicator’ (in either national or world rankings) being that of academics’ publications. And reward structures reflect this orientation, with titles and promotion very much dependent on publications (and in some countries, academics are paid a personal bonus directly for every publication they produce). In other words, academics are not just expected to write but they are being paid to write. Partly as a result, the sheer quantity of academic publications is rising exponentially.

But some nice questions arise: To what extent do academics reflect on writing as such? Do they ever talk – over lunch, over a coffee – about writing? Does any academic, when asked for her/his occupation, say ‘I am a writer’? To ask these questions is surely to indicate at once that writing as such is rarely part of the discourse of academic life and perhaps even more rarely comes to play a part in the formation of academic identity.

But what is it for an academic to write? What is academic writing in this sense? How can we expect our students to come to care about their writing and to write well if we do not care passionately about our own writing? How can we expect those of our colleague academics – who have focused on their teaching - who are now being expected to write for publication for the very first time to come to take writing seriously (on top of everything else in life) unless writing itself becomes an activity that has its own interest and gives personal satisfaction?

In my talk, I want to share some thoughts – albeit somewhat personal, autobiographical and even polemical – on these matters. I shall suggest that there are new responsibilities coming onto academics to care about writing and that there are considerable satisfactions from doing so. Having such a care towards writing can even change lives