

What's writing in the academy got to do with work based writing? An exploratory study in social work writing using a 'text-oriented' team ethnographyⁱ

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1. Introduction: the 'problem' with writing

Social work courses in the university, like other professionally oriented courses, face in two directions: towards the academic domain and towards the professional domain, each of which has its own practices and values. Within this complex disciplinary and professional space, writing is a high-stakes activity. Writing in social work education courses – as in most UK higher education courses – is the main form of student assessment, and students pass or fail depending on their success in producing the writing required of the institution. Writing is also a core activity in professional practice, central to processes of assessing people's needs and in making the case for particular services to meet these needs. The focus on accountability and the introduction of digital systems to record and share information in the health and social care sector has added to the complexity of professional writing in social work (Hall et al., 2010).

Concerns are regularly expressed about the quality of writing in both domains, predominantly within a deficit discourse (Jones et al., 1999; Lillis, 2001, 2009) attributing blame both to the so-called 'quality' of students and social workers themselves and their literacy practices. There are regular outcries about university students' poor writing in both public media and academic accounts (see Lillis and Scott, 2007). With specific regard to students of social work, concerns were expressed by the Social Work Task Force (SWTF) about the 'calibre' of some entrants to social work courses with an explicit link made to writing both as the means of assessing the 'calibre' and as a key area that needed development (SWTF, 2009). The SWTF (2009) proposed the introduction of a written test to measure "the clarity of writing, logical coherence and the capacity for developing reflective and analytical thinking" (p. 21), which has recently led to the requirement that all candidates should have passed GCSE English or a certified equivalent prior to acceptance on the programme (College of Social Work, 2014).

Just as concerns have been expressed about the quality of student writing within social work programmes, there are also considerable concerns about the writing in social work professional practice, two key ones being: (1) the amount of writing that social workers are having to do with some claims made that writing takes up more than half of social workers' time (BASW, 2012; Holmes, Mcdermid & Jones, 2009; O'Rourke, 2010); (2) the quality of writing that social workers produce. The latter is most often framed in terms of 'poor recording' with recent government sponsored reports pointing to the importance of improving recording practices and systems (Munro, 2011) or nested within broader concerns about effective communication, as has surfaced in some high profile cases where 'communication' has been mentioned as a cause of problems (e.g. Laming, 2009).

However, whilst concerns have been expressed about social work writing, it is important to note that limited research has taken place to date on the nature of 'social work writing', in

terms of texts and practices. Some research has been carried out on the writing of social work students on educational courses (e.g. Alter & Adkins, 2006; Paré 2000; Waller, 2000), but little has been carried out on professional social work writing or the intersections between the two (but see Paré and Le Maistre, 2006). Our research seeks to contribute towards building a map of the writing demands of professional social work practice and to find ways of talking about writing which is meaningful and useful to educators and social workers. We are particularly interested in exploring the links between the writing demands and practices of the workplace with those of the academy. In this way, the project contributes to debates about what kinds of writing should be included in the curriculum of the academy, but also to debates about how professional social work writing might be developed and supported in the context of professional social work practice.

2. A social practice approach to writing

Our approach to researching and understanding writing can be summarised as that of writing as a social practice. What this means in research terms is as follows.

- *Epistemologically*: writing is understood as a social practice, that is, as always situated in a specific context of production, distribution and evaluation, involving specific participants (both real and immanent), specific linguistic, rhetorical and material conventions which are sociohistorically located (locatable). Our work draws heavily on New Literacy Studies (Street, 2010) and in particular Academic Literacies (Lea and Street, 1998; Lillis and Scott, 2007) and connects with other anthropological traditions of literacy research, such as Chartier (1993) and Fraenkel (2001).
- *Methodologically*: a social practice approach to writing involves paying considerable attention to context, usually adopting ethnographic methodologies which include observation, interviews and collections of texts and documentation to build a ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973) of writing – what it is, when and where it happens, who is involved. Considerable emphasis is placed on reaching ‘emic’ understandings about what it means to write, that is, seeking out the perspectives of the participants – in this instance, of social workers. Attention to context includes attention to the written texts produced but does not see texts as the primary focus.
- *Ideologically*: a social practice approach involves a critical orientation to dominant discourse about literacy – notably that of deficit – and challenge autonomous ideologies of writing and literacy (Street 1984), that is, the idea that literacy is a single universal phenomenon, easily transferable (e.g. if you write successfully in one domain, you will necessarily be successful in writing in another domain) with universal consequences (e.g. educational, institutional or economic success). Literacy, that is, what counts as literacy or, in the context of this paper, what counts as good or effective writing is always bound up with issues of power, including access to and control over resources for writing.

Social practice approaches to writing in academia have thrown into relief the limitations of dominant discourse on student writing (see Lillis and Scott, 2007) and on writing on professional programmes (Baynham, 2000; Rai, 2004, 2006; Lea and Stierer, 2000). The epistemological shift away from a sole or primary focus on texts when exploring writing has helped to foreground many dimensions to student academic writing which had previously remained invisible or had been ignored. These include the impact of power relations on student writing; the contested nature of academic writing conventions; the centrality of identity and identification in academic writing; and the nature of generic academic, as well as disciplinary specific, writing practices (for examples, see Baynham, 2000; Ivanič, 1998; Lea

and Street, 1998; Jones et al., 1999; Lea and Stierer, 2000; Rai, 2004, 2006, 2014; Thesen and van Pletzen, 2006; Tuck 2012).

3. Writing in social work education

As with other professional academic practice-based courses, social work degrees are an example of academic study and qualification which have a double orientation – towards the academy and towards a specific arena of professional work. This means that the curriculum, pedagogic design and assessment are driven by higher education specifications as well as by those of professional bodies. In terms of higher education specifications, writing, comes under “communication” which is considered one of the five key skill areas (the others are information technology, application of number, problem solving and working with others) as set out by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA – see <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/Framework-Higher-Education-Qualifications-08.pdf> accessed 208/14). Designers and assessors of university courses are expected to take account of these skill areas and seek to develop these at appropriate levels across university degree programmes.

At the same time, social work courses in higher education are driven by bodies seeking to develop the skills and expertise considered essential to their profession. At the time of writing, the professional body for social work in England has just transferred to the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC), which has set the standards of proficiency that social work students must meet. The HCPC also approves universities to deliver social work education and sets minimum standards for the recruitment of students and delivery of the curriculum. Additional guidance was, until recently, provided by the College of Social Workⁱⁱ which provided professional endorsement of courses meeting its requirements. Both of these bodies refer to the importance of writing and written communication at the point of recruitment and as required capabilities for qualification (Health and Care Professions Council [HCPC], 2012; The College of Social Work [CSW], 2012). The HCPC standards and the CSW guidance are based closely on the Professional Capability Framework (PCF – see <http://www.tcsw.org.uk/pcf.aspx> accessed 21/0814), an over-arching framework of competence. The PCF makes direct reference to writing across all levels. For example, at the point of qualification, social workers should be able to: record information in a timely, respectful and accurate manner; write records and reports for a variety of purposes with language suited to function using information management systems; distinguish fact from opinion; and record conflicting views and perspectives.

All providers of social work qualifying courses must currently map their programmes and constituent modules against the HCPC standards in order to gain approval and endorsement to offer professional training. Exactly how academic and professional (explicit and implicit) specifications are enacted in different courses is unclear, and there are few studies focusing on writing in the social work curriculum in the UK. However, from existing studies (Rai, 2004, 2006, 2014), it seems that there are three main types of writing in social work courses although only two of these are explicitly assessed as part of higher education courses – essay writing and reflective writing. The third type, practice-related writing, takes place within the workplace rather than within the academy, as part of the course, and it seems to be assumed that the teaching and learning of such writing will be learned as part of getting on with the job of doing social work. Such writing is not assessed in terms of social work *writing*, but as evidence of social work *practice*, that is of evidence of being a good social worker. There is

clearly more exploration to be carried out on the nature of academia-based social work writing, but an overview of the three main types of writing is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Social work writing in the academy

	Explicitly assessed by the university		Only indirectly assessed by the university as part of assessing social work practice
Types of writing	1 Essay writing	2 Reflective writing	3 Practice-related writing
Key characteristics	<p>The presentation of argument</p> <p>Knowledge of relevant subject areas</p> <p>Use of evidence from course materials, research, policy and accounts of professional practice</p>	<p>The presentation of reflection, primarily of practice but also involving personal and professional values</p> <p>Knowledge of relevant subject areas</p> <p>Use of the course materials to show how personal reflection has built on/taken account of existing research, theory and policy</p>	<p>Range of writing tasks that are part of social work practice, e.g. case notes, assessment reports, emails.</p>
Assessed as	A piece of writing which demonstrates the key characteristics above and is assessed by a university tutor	A piece of writing which demonstrates the key characteristics above and is assessed by a university tutor	Demonstrating evidence of successful practice, assessed by a social work agency and the higher education institution

Whilst there is often considerable guidance and explicit assessment criteria in social work courses in relation to writing Types 1 and 2, there is no such emphasis on Type 3, which is, as already mentioned, part of the work that students do on placement and which is overseen by the particular partner organization (e.g. a social work agency). The type of writing carried out in this work-based context – for example, case notes, which we return to below – is not directly assessed by either the university or the partner organization but rather only indirectly as part of an assessment of their general social work competence. Where there does seem to be an implicit connection between the writing within the academic domain and the professional domain is in the considerable attention given to *reflective writing* as part of a tradition of the reflective practitioner, which involves commenting on work based experience and is seen as central to developing a highly motivated, professional and critical practitioner. Nevertheless, whilst reflection as a personal and professional practice is considered

fundamental in social work programmes, there is often considerable vagueness about what it means to do reflective writing (Rai, 2004).

What interests us in particular in this chapter are what we can usefully refer to as those occluded practices (after Swales, 2009:6) in the right hand column in Table 1 (i.e. practice-related writing); that is, writing that is clearly central to professional social work practice but is outside programmes' explicit academic assessment regimes.

4. The project and research methodology: *Getting it Write (GiW)*

As part of a larger study focusing on professional social work writing, the GiW project involved working with five social workers over a period of nine months to explore their professional social work practices and their perspectives on the extent to which writing on the social work course connected with the writing demands of professional social work.

There were three key questions driving the GiW Project.

- How well does the BA Social Work prepare graduates for the challenges of writing in professional social work practice?
- To what extent does the writing undertaken as part of the social work course prepare students for professional social work writing?
- What challenges are posed in writing in social work practice?

In order to research these questions, we adopted what we refer to as a 'text-oriented team ethnography' (see discussions in Lillis, 2008; Lillis and Rai, 2011) with the aim of building rich pictures of writing in professional practice. The research team involved two researchers, one from the field of social work and one from the field of Academic Literacies; five co-researchers (two men and three women) who had gained their qualifying Social Work degree within the previous two years. All the co-researchers worked in child protection teams for five different agencies. Data collected included diaries kept by the social workers listing the types of writing carried out, collections of written texts produced as part of their work, individual interviews and group discussions – some via phone and some face to face (see Table 2).

Table 2: Outline of GiW methodology and summary of data collected

<i>Key methodological principles</i>	<i>Putting the principles into action</i>
Sustained engagement with writers and the sites of production	Five social workers as co-researchers who collected data about their own practices and met with researchers over a period of 18 months
Collection and analysis of multiple data sources in order to build rich understandings of what is involved and what is at stake (for whom)	-20 days of diaries kept by co-researchers recording the range, type and amount of writing carried out in their daily working lives -200 anonymised texts produced in practice -4 group discussions involving researchers and co-researchers which took place during the period of journal and text collection

	-1 individual interview with each co-researcher about their writing practices and experiences -3-day face-to-face workshops exploring writing in everyday social work practice and challenges -Teaching and assessment materials from The Open University BA Social Work
Valuing and engaging with emic and etic approaches and discourses ⁱⁱⁱ	Co-researchers contribute their understandings and discourses through interviews/discussions/workshops

The involvement of the five co-researchers was essential to the success of the project for a number of reasons, most obviously, in order to gain access to the texts that they were involved in producing and the practices in which these were embedded, but also for their critical insight into issues surrounding writing at work. A considerable amount of time throughout the period of the project was spent in securing permission from relevant authorities to access texts and practices and in anonymising highly confidential data.

Interdisciplinary and academic-professional collaboration is central to this project. Such collaboration facilitates the building of shared understandings about writing in social work which can result in useful and usable knowledge. This has implications for what we focus on and how, including how we develop our “languages of description” (Lillis, 2008:375). We do not assume that specific terminology may be useful (e.g. particular linguistic categories) but rather work within and across discourses to develop ways of talking about writing that might both illuminate the nature of the problem and enable the resolution of aspects of the problem. An example of this grappling with languages of description is illustrated in discussion about text labelling in Section 7 below. Of course there are tensions when working across disciplinary domains and discourses. Where we as researchers sometimes differ is the extent to which we consider we should be focusing explicitly on language and writing: Theresa tends to want to make texts and language an explicit focus of analysis and discussion with social workers so as to draw; Lucy tends to want to facilitate discussion about participants' individual perceptions and experiences of institutional practices. We also have different positions with regard to the phenomenon we are exploring, with Lucy being more of an ‘insider’ (as a social work educator and as, previously, a social worker) and Theresa as an ‘outsider’. We see such differences as productive tensions for our work, enabling a constant dialogue about the meaning of writing facilitated through a constant interplay between our insider/outsider positions (Jacobs, 2007) with regard to social work education and practice and language/literacy (for more detailed discussion, see Lillis and Rai, 2011).

Starting from the premise that we already have a provisional map of the main types of writing involved in the academic domain of social work programmes course, including some of the challenges these present to students (e.g. Paré, 2000; Rai, 2004, 2006), the key goal of the GiW study was as follows: 1) to explore the nature of writing in social work professional practice; 2) to analyse the similarities and differences between writing in the academic domain and writing in professional practice, and to consider the relevance of the former to the latter from the perspective of professional social workers. The aim therefore was to put the spotlight on the interface between social work writing in the academy and social work writing in everyday professional practice.

5. Preliminary findings about professional social work writing

5.1. Writing is central to everyday professional social work

The diaries were undertaken over 20 days of social work practice and each social worker recorded a total of 5 days over this period (roughly one day a week). Social workers also collated all texts referred to in the diaries. The diaries show that writing is central to everyday practice and that, whilst the amount of writing varies from day to day, writing activity happens regularly throughout the working day. Table 3 shows the pattern of writing activity for each of the five social workers across the working day. The numbers in each column refer to the writing activity logged across five days per each social worker with each specific instance of writing counted as one, for example, writing an email = 1^{iv}, writing a report or part of a report = 1. Thus, for example, there were 10 instances of writing that were carried out by SW1 between the hours of 9 and 10 am over a 5 day period.

Table 3: Time of day writing was carried out

Time of day	Numbers of individual instances of writing				
	SW1	SW2	SW3	SW4	SW5
7.00			1		
8.00				4	1
9.00	10	4	1	1	3
10.00	7	1	3	1	5
11.00	6	1	6	1	2
12.00	7	1	7	1	2
13.00	4	2	5	2	3
14.00	5	1	1	1	6
15.00	5	3	2	4	8
16.00	2		3		3
17.00	4		1	1	2
18.00			1		
19.00			2		
20.00					
21.00		1			
22.00		2			
23.00				5	

Table 3 also shows that writing was carried out across the working day and that some writing takes place outside of contractual hours, as indicated by the shaded areas. Some of this writing can involve considerable additional time. For example, as indicated in Table 4, entries on one day of SW4 show her spending almost two hours after 21.30 engaged in writing tasks. In this case, the writing involves three different text types – case notes, referral, placement with parent agreement (for discussion of categories, see Section 6) relating to one service user.

Table 4: Extract of journal from SW4 to illustrate writing activity outside of the working day

Approx time	Place (office, home, car etc.)	Medium (handwritten notes in notebook,	Type of text (case notes, emails, minutes of meeting etc.)	Notes on text (e.g. issues arising, who else was involved)
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		<i>email, IT system etc.)</i>		
21.38 Approx 10-15 mins (U)	Home	IT system	Case notes	Young person and carer
22.07 Approx 30 mins (U)	Home	IT system	Referral	Birth mother, family support worker, manager & social worker. It took me days to get the correct referral form so that the referral could be made. I sent many emails and made 3 telephone calls before tracking down the correct form. I had in fact completed an incorrect form and had to redo it.
22.49 Approx 1 hour(U)	Home	IT system	Placement with parent agreement	Discussion with judge in court and guardian. Discussion with birth mother and her sister in Ireland. Discussion with my manager and senior managers.
23.51 3 mins (U)	Home	IT system	Case note	Discussion with birth mother's relative. Agreement sought.

The 'U' in the extract in Table 3 refers to 'uninterrupted' time, as compared with 'I' interrupted time, a point return to below.

SW4's notes in her diary give some impression of the complexity of the writing task: she indicates the number of perspectives which she has to take into account when writing these texts to prepare a case (i.e. the service user, the mother, a sister, a carer, a guardian, the birth mother, senior managers) as well as some of the bureaucratic difficulties she has in tracking down the right forms. The challenge that such 'orchestration' of voices (after Bakhtin, 1984) can present is part of our ongoing research and analysis.

5.2. Social workers are involved in the production of many types of texts

On the basis of the journals discussed above, 21 text types were identified as being produced as part of everyday professional practice.^v These are listed in Table 5. Those texts marked with a √ are texts which involve a template of some kind and thus specify what kinds of information and evaluation are required by the institution and how such information is required to be structured.

Table 5: Range of text types recorded diaries

	<i>Type of writing</i>	<i>Involve a template</i>
1	Breach summons	√
2	Case note	
3	Core assessment	√
4	Core group meeting	

5	Court statement	√
6	Email	√
7	Finance form	√
8	Handwritten notes (on home visit)	
9	Letter / draft letter	√
10	Minutes of meeting (between professionals) (safety plan)	
11	Minutes of review meeting /carers review meeting	√
12	Placement information	√
13	Police referral/referral	√
14	Placement review	√
15	Placement with parent agreement	√
16	Record of observation	
17	Review child protection conference	√
18	Supervision plan	
19	Text message	
20	Transport request	√
21	Update	√

The types of writing vary in complexity from brief emails to the completion of complex reports such as a placement review or core assessment. The shortest texts collected during the 20 days were emails of one line, and the longest text was a core assessment of 25 pages. Concern was expressed about the value of some texts and who such reports actually benefitted:

These are reports that are shared with the children and families we work with... it's not helpful to be given a 40 page document, and that's more to do with the organisation and the information they need to capture (SW5)

Here, the social worker is signalling the multiple – and often incompatible – audiences many documents involve, and the emphasis on documents as a means of tracking institutional accountability.

Of course the complexity (and time involved) of a writing task does not necessarily map on to the length of a specific text, although length of a text in a social work context is often a good indicator that the text is complex and will involve considerable time in writing. Furthermore, it is important to note that it is often the relationship between the texts that presents difficulties, as illustrated by a core text type – case notes. More than a third of all texts that the social workers produced were case notes. Case notes are a core aspect of social work practice, serving to provide a running account of the specific activities that social workers do, and their justification for particular kinds of intervention with users of the service. These texts present a particular challenge for social workers because they function institutionally as a ‘text chain’ (chaîne de texte, Fraenkel, 2001) rather than an individual text; that is, each case note becomes part of a larger text, a case history. The elements that are considered to be key – description (of a person, a problem, a situation), professional evaluation, articulation of decisions, and listing of actions taken, including justification – need to occur at regular

intervals across specific text chains but exactly when and how each element is (or should be) included is often not straightforward.^{vi}

5.3. Writing is often an interrupted activity

Because of the heavy workloads and considerable pressures on time, writing sometimes takes place at the margins of work (the official workload day) and is an interrupted and fragmented activity. Table 3 details the texts that were written outside of the official working day. Interrupted writing – that is, writing which a social worker begins but then has to leave because of other demands and then returns to at a different point – is quite common. More than 40% all writing recorded in the journals as taking place during work time was of an interrupted nature. This interrupted writing presents many challenges to producing successful texts, particularly more complex writing of the type described above (see Table 4) which involves representing the perspectives of many people. We have already mentioned that some writing takes place outside of the working day, often at home, and one reason for this is to enable social workers the time and space to work at this more complex writing.

The challenges social workers face in managing to keep up with writing demands within the working day, alongside other work is illustrated in an extract from one journal entry below:

Time: 19:39. Place: Office.

I returned to the office following my home visit and typed up the notes. If we do not record a home visit in the visits section on the system, there is no evidence that a visit has taken place (if there is no record, it did not happen). It is rare that I have an opportunity to type up home visits straight after the visit, but this was a new case and my recordings start well on new cases as I do not want to fall behind as what tends to happen on cases I have held for a longer period of time. Most of the home visits I complete are after school hours when children are seen from 4pm. This means that the home visits are finished outside of our typical working hours and unless you return to the office, the write-ups of these visits are often neglected.

In this journal entry the social worker outlines the challenges of writing at an appropriate time (straight after a visit) and of needing to work outside working hours in order to fulfil writing demands.

5.4. Writing presents challenges in voice and audience

The texts that social workers produce cannot be viewed as separate from other texts; for example, case notes are part of a larger text chain in that they get drawn on and used in other documents, such as assessment or court reports. This often involves recontextualisation – taking parts of an existing text, in terms of content or presuppositions. A specific example of the challenges faced in successfully recontextualising case notes was raised in one of the group discussions. One social worker discussed the difficulties he faced in his attempt to represent accurately the attitude of a young person in a court report. In his case notes, the social worker had recorded verbatim what the person had said, including the swearing that was directed at him and other workers because, in general, he feels that recording the actual language used more accurately reflects events and people's behaviour:

In our case notes, we write what is said and it does show how powerful words can actually be. If we don't capture what is actually said, then we can mis-assess a situation and, you know, potentially be at risk or put other members of public at risk. (SW1)

But, in writing a formal report for the courts about this person, he had been advised by his manager that he could not include such 'swearing'. In the court report, the verbatim account of the swearing was cut and replaced with a description:

During our discussion, X became increasingly agitated and angry about engaging with any of his session. He became verbally abusive to the degree that both professionals were subjected to a barrage of abuse and threats. All efforts to encourage X to engage failed to discourage him from being both abusive and threatening. [Extract from Report SW1]

The social worker felt that the exclusion of direct reporting of the actual language used by the young person had the effect of diminishing the aggression he had shown and considered that this contributed to the court's decision to take no action with regard to this particular young person. From the discussion with co-researchers, it became clear that the use of direct reporting of people's words is a practice that varies according to institutions and individuals: as can be seen below in this section, in other agencies the use of direct quoting was allowed and even encouraged.

One of the reasons why the writing of both shorter and longer texts can be particularly challenging is that the topic is often highly charged emotionally yet the social worker is required to write in a detached way often, as outlined above, in pressured circumstances. Many of the 200 texts collected are structured around the description and evaluation of highly emotionally charged situations, a brief extract of which is included here from an initial report to the courts:

I asked X why she had told a social worker that XX had raped XXX: She responded, "XX told me that XXX was beating her on the bum and spanking her". XX stated that she questioned XXX and asked why he spanked her on the bum. She said that it was then that she found out that XXX was in fact telling lies. (Extract from Report. SW4)

Whilst it is not surprising to find emotionally charged writing in social work practice, it is important to acknowledge the specific challenges such writing presents, as indicated by comments on a particular genre 'life story work'^{viii}:

I often find it hugely challenging, and a particular area of difficulty for me is 'life story' work, and 'later life letters', so when I have to give an account to child of what's happened to them throughout their life, and why decisions have been taken and why their parents weren't able to care for them but in a child friendly focused way. Hugely challenging. And that takes me hours to write, and I start and I delete it and I write and I just think I don't know how to tell this child. This is so painful. (SW3)

And social workers often feel there is not enough time to devote to the crafting and writing of such texts:

Something I struggle with in my daily practice is that I don't feel that I have the time, the capacity to write the quality of the reports I want to write. (SW5)

Given the fragmented nature of the time spent on writing and the complexity with regard to voice and audience, producing case notes and other documents to the standard social workers consider desirable is difficult, with social workers, as in the example above, signalling their dissatisfaction with the quality of writing they are able to produce.

6. The relationship between writing in academic and professional domains

They [on the BA university course] don't actually talk about the types of reports that a social worker in a child protection service would be doing, a social worker in an adoption and fostering service would do, the kind in a youth offenders – it's almost missing that module where ok this is what a day in the life of a social worker, these are the types of reports you will be expected to write and this is what a format is or a Form E or a child protection investigation (SW3)

A key goal in the GiW study was to explore the extent to which the writing undertaken as part of academic social work courses prepares students for professional social work writing. Based on the exploratory GiW study, it is possible to identify some key differences between the writing within the academic domain and writing within the professional domain. These are summarized in Table 6.

Table 6: Provisional overview of key differences between writing in academic and professional domains

What do we know about social work writing in the academic domain?	What do we know about social work writing in the professional domain?
A narrow range of texts – two principal text types – essays and reflective writing	A wide range of texts – 21 text types identified in this study, from brief emails to complex and lengthy assessment documents
Texts tend to function as individual texts	Texts tend to function as text chains
Texts are read and evaluated by one expert – the teacher	Texts are read and judged by many 'experts' / people from a range of perspectives (e.g. users, managers, police, courts, health)
Texts represent (are expected to represent) single author perspectives	Texts represent multiple voices – a key task of the social worker is to orchestrate information and perspectives from many sources (e.g. social workers, doctors, users, carers, different family members, teachers)
A key goal is to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of a particular disciplinary area	A key goal is to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of key perspectives and events in ways which clearly signal actions to be taken

Deadlines for production of texts are set well in advance and are signalled as being central to academic success	Writing often takes place at the margins of other activity
There is a clear temporal end to the texts produced – they are finished once they have been assessed	Texts have a very long life to be read and reviewed by different readers

However, several co-researchers felt that the type of writing they carried out on the course – the ‘essay’ and reflective writing – had taught them about being precise and critical, both important aspects for their professional writing:

I think in terms of sort of the sitting down and sort of writing a very clear report, then yes I think probably there is some of the learning around critical writing and the analysis, I think that’s beneficial. (SW5)

I used to waffle quite badly really, you know,--- I’m getting a lot more to the point, instead of taking 5 or 6 sentences to make a point I’m making it a lot quicker (SW2)

And one co-researcher commented on how the writing on the academic course had, in an implicit way, taught her about the importance of language and the power of words:

You start to learn how to present information in the most powerful way. So you almost get into a trend of recognising that if you write in this particular way, it is likely to influence the audience in either a positive or negative way---It gives the impression and to represent you, you learn that if you write in a particular way then it’s easier for people to pick up on that---, and you know the audience being the judge, determines which one of those is the most powerful or which one of those feels as if it is the most realistic, reasonable view of what did or didn’t happen. I think sometimes we forget about that, but I think we do learn it subconsciously. (SW5)

However, the same social worker also felt that she did not have enough time to pay as much attention to this crafting of language in her reports, something she deeply regretted:

You know I feel like my practice writing, in comparison to my essay writing is quite poor now and it’s not of the standard that I would want to produce. --- I think that is something I struggle with in my daily practice I don’t feel that I have the time, the capacity whatever to write, write the reports, the quality of the reports I want to write (SW5)

In a similar way, the importance attached to reflective writing in the academic domain, which the social workers valued, was something they felt there was little space for in professional writing practice. One social worker commented on the contrast between the encouragement on the academic course to engage in reflection, as compared with the realities of social work practice. Talking of social workers he had observed when he began working:

I mean there were some fantastic social workers but they weren’t having the time to kind of write you know, and having time to think about what they were writing. (SW2)

Whilst there was concern that little or no attention was paid to the teaching of professional writing within the academic domain, there was a consensus that it was probably impossible to prepare people for the complex writing demands of the workplace.

While discreet writing skills can be taught (e.g. report writing) there is no way to teach the reality of writing in practice in advance. (SW 4)

The implication here is that the way to learn professional social work writing is to do so in the work context, a point made by Paré (2000, 2004) in his research on social work in Canada. Yet there seems to be little time for such teaching and learning at work, not least because of pressures of time all round. And yet the ‘shock’ of the challenges social workers face in engaging with the wide range and amount of writing at work can be considerable:

I think it wasn't a shock for me because I was already recording and writing reports for many years, but it could be a shock for someone newly in the field for the first time to experience how much is involved and how much multi-tasking is involved in terms of your recording, the types of recording you're involved in. So it's not been too bad for me, but it still highlights that you are expected to record in so many different ways – how to write, and so many different styles. It takes time really to experience, you know for it to improve over a period of time. (SW1)

Findings from this exploratory study suggest that, whilst some social workers see strong connections between writing carried out in the academic domain and the professional domain – notably SW 5 who points to the relevance of core aspects of writing in the academic domain to her professional writing –, there is considerable work to be done to prepare social workers for the range of writing required in professional practice. Whether and exactly what kind of preparation should take place as part of academic courses or as part of professional development is a question for further research and discussion.

7. A note on the language of description: the use of ‘text types’

It will have been noted that, throughout the chapter, we have used the term ‘text types’ as part of our language of description, for two main reasons. First, the classification of text types here was generated with the co-researchers based on institutional labelling practices related to the purposes which the texts serve. The use of intuitional labels provides a first step, immediate shared language for talking about the range and amount of writing being carried out. Second, text types allow us to focus on specific instances of writing (after Fairclough, 1992) without (implicitly) simplifying the articulation of specific instances of writing involved through the use of ‘genre’ as an idealization or reification of actual instances of texts. Using text type categories such as ‘case notes’ is a working term in acknowledgement that a longer term goal of our work is to articulate the ways in which specific instances of texts constitute specific practices in social work activity. We explicitly do not intend text types to be co-terminous with a particular ‘genre’, whether understood as either activity or text (see Lillis, 2013 for ways in which genre is used and slippage towards genre as textual label). For example, we have noted in Section 5.2 that a particular ‘text type’ – case notes – is an institutional label which is clearly helpful to social workers discussing different kinds of writing they engage in but – based on preliminary analyses – that a wide range of text types constitute ‘case notes’ both in relation to its formal features and rhetorical purpose. (they include for example, minutes of meetings, copies of emails, descriptions of events). Text type is robust enough as a working category to enable dialogue with producers and users of social

work writing and also to be able to begin to map the differences and similarities between actual instances of writing activity in academic and professional domains. At the same time, it is open enough to enable us to explore the range of rhetorical practices involved in any instance of text production and to explore how texts as chains or trajectories constitute social action.

8. Conclusion

This study has been based on close collaboration between researchers in language studies and social work working alongside co-researchers from social work practice. This approach has facilitated an insight into the nature of writing in the academic and practice domains. There are key differences between writing in these domains of social work in terms of the text types and the practices in which these are embedded. The extent to which the kinds of writing carried out in the academic domain are considered relevant to the professional domain is varied: some social workers emphasized the lack of relevance whilst others felt that broad approaches were helpful, such as learning the rhetorical significance of crafting written texts in particular ways and adopting a critical and reflective perspective towards their work, including their writing. At the moment, professional or practice-based writing is not on the curriculum agenda in the academic domain, only indirectly through assessment of overall practice. Yet at the same time, there is little space within the professional or work domain to teach and learn how to produce the kinds of written texts that are a central part of everyday social work professional practice.

Writing within the professional domain is to a large extent an occluded practice from the perspective of education providers in that it is not directly taught nor explicitly assessed. Our preliminary findings also indicate that within the domain of social work little explicit attention is given to exploring what writing is and does and, importantly, how writers get to write. Writing also continues to hold a highly contested place within social work practice as in fact not really being the ‘work’:

To our service users, those reports are often irrelevant. It's the actual face-to-face social work that they value (SW2)

Given the amount of writing that social workers do, the complexity of some of tasks and the highly consequential nature of such writing (for social workers as well as service users), there is clearly a need to recognise that writing in many ways *is* social work practice and to pay some serious attention as to where, how and when professional writing can be developed. This understanding provides not only educators but managers and trainers in social work with important conceptual tools to evaluate and develop the effectiveness of social work writing.

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ⁱ This chapter is a translated, revised and updated version of Lillis and Rai (2012).

ⁱⁱ The College of Social work was closed down in 2015 following the government's' decision to stop funding. <http://www.communitycare.co.uk/2015/06/18/college-social-work-close-due-lack-funds/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Emic and etic are core notions used in ethnography to refer, broadly speaking, to 'insider' and 'outsider'(usually academic) perspectives. For summary and discussion of relationship between these perspectives, see Lillis 2013 pp 84-85

^{iv} From discussion we know that the numbers are an underestimate particularly with regard to emails.

^v The text types listed here are those that social workers were involved in writing during the period of their journal keeping.

^{vi} We are focusing in more detail on case note recording as part of our broader research into social work writing.

^{vii} This particular text type does not figure in Table 5 because it was not logged as a writing task within the journal keeping period.