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TEACHING REFLECTION

Our Writing Could Be Otherwise: Reflections on Teaching Citational Politics as an Aspect of Academic Writing

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This teaching reflection shares experiences of teaching citational politics in the context of a PhD course titled Writing as Thinking: Experimenting and Working with Writing as Knowledge Practice. It describes course content, and in particular the kinds of discussions that arose when students and teachers engaged with ideas of citational justice. Based on these experiences, I make two suggestions: first, that we should not consider citation practices (and their politics) in isolation, but rather as one aspect of the intertwined set of practices that comprise scholarly writing more widely; and second, that if we care about citational politics we should also seek to diversify the nature of what is accepted as "academic writing."

Keywords: academic writing; citational politics; epistemic injustice; teaching; representational practices

Introduction

This is a somewhat unusual text. In the following four-thousand-odd words I want to use the format of a teaching reflection to discuss my experiences with teaching citational politics as one aspect of a course on academic writing in the social sciences. I will describe the content and aims of this course, titled Writing as Thinking: Experimenting and Working with Writing as Knowledge Practice and offered to PhD-level students, but, because I am the course designer and lead teacher, this description is inevitably entangled with my own biography and writing practices. I have shaped the course according to my experiences of and views on the issues it covers; as such, I cannot give a purely descriptive account of the course but will make reference to some of the autobiographical aspects that have helped constitute it. Indeed, this feature of the text relates to the arguments that I want to make: first, that it makes sense to consider (and teach) citational politics in the context of reflection on academic writing practices more generally; and, second, that if we care about citational politics we should also seek to diversify the nature of what is accepted as "academic writing."

The rest of the text develops in a number of sections. First, I describe the Writing as Thinking course, giving an overview of the topics and activities that it covers (and where these emerged from). I then discuss my experiences of teaching citational politics within the course, how this relates to wider discussions of this topic within academia, and how my thinking has been shaped through these experiences. A closing section makes the argument that we should not consider citation practices, and their implications for epistemic and other forms of justice, in isolation, but as one aspect of the intertwined set of practices that comprise scholarly writing more generally. "Citational justice" should go hand in hand with more just forms of writing and publishing—specifically, an openness to diverse genres and modes of representation and to different forms of knowledge.

I cannot proceed without making two important acknowledgements. The first is that my thinking about these issues has been hugely shaped by the reflections and inputs of the PhD students that I have worked with on the different iterations of the Writing as Thinking course and by the collaborations I have had as part of developing the edited collection *Revisiting Reflexivity: Liveable Worlds in Research and Beyond* (Davies et al. 2025). In particular, writing about the role of reflexivity in research (and in writing about research) has brought me into deeper contact with the ideas and literature I draw upon here. I am therefore extremely grateful to my co-editors, Andrea Schikowitz, Fredy Mora Gámez, Elaine Goldberg, Esther Dessewffy,

Bao-Chau Pham, Ariadne Sevgi Avkıran, and Kathleen Gregory, as well as to all the students I have worked with. A second acknowledgement is of my own lack of expertise and imperfect practices with regard to the ideas and behaviours I will discuss. I do not want to set myself up as an expert on these topics: While I have some familiarity with discussions around citational politics and epistemic justice, I am acutely aware that much of what I do in my academic writing (and academic life more widely) does not live up to my aim to make academia a more just place. (One, non-exculpatory, reason for this discrepancy is the contemporary conditions of academic life-work and the expectations and demands that are placed on us by neoliberal research institutions—a theme that I will return to.) This reflection should therefore be read as a situated account of a particular set of experiences, not as a manual or as a definitive account of teaching citational politics.

The Writing as Thinking Course: A Brief Introduction

Writing as Thinking: Experimenting and Working with Writing as Knowledge Practice emerged out of a sense that writing is central to academic work—and particularly to PhD students, who are almost universally tasked with presenting the results of their research in the forms of journal articles and/or a monograph—but that how to approach it often remains implicit. What are we doing when we write? What is "good" academic writing, and what criteria should we use to assess this? How can we learn to write more reliably, effectively, or beautifully? The course is grounded in questions such as these and aims, as the syllabus states, "to assist students to understand what is at stake in academic writing as representational practice, to gain confidence in working with different genres and styles of writing, and to develop their own voice within their research" (Davies 2025). It is an elective five ECTS[1] course open to PhD students across the social sciences and usually comprises individuals from a variety of qualitative and quantitative fields. Interestingly, a substantial majority of students have identified as women.[2]

I have always enjoyed, and been interested in, the process of writing. In my view two things have particularly shaped my writing practice: the fact that I have always read a lot, and widely, and my background in public science communication (in the form of an MSc in the field and a period working in exhibition research and development at the Science Museum in London). Indeed, it was a writing-related epiphany that led me away from the natural sciences into science communication, when I was taught about the history (and thereby the constructedness and non-inevitability) of scholarly genres,[3] an idea that made me question much of what had been taken for granted concerning the nature of research in my biochemistry degree. Developing the Writing as Thinking course has therefore been an opportunity for me to share my enthusiasms with students, delve further into scholarly literature from Science and Technology Studies (STS), writing studies, and other social science fields that have studied or discussed academic writing, and (I hope) allow for similar epiphanies on the part of others with regard to the non-inevitable nature of academic writing. Coming from STS, I spend a lot of my time teaching the field's central ideas about the constructedness of knowledge production;[4] part of my interest in developing this course, then, was in allowing students from other disciplines to access and make use of some of these ideas, and especially to communicate that not only is writing an integral aspect of epistemic work but that it has a politics.

In developing the course, I drew on literature from STS (in particular the work of John Law, Max Liboiron, and Kat Jungnickel) combined with the work of other social science scholars who have reflected on writing (including Howard Becker, Laurel Richardson, Helen Sword, and Julia Molinari). Based on my belief that practice is central to refining writing skills, I also wanted the course to be as hands on as possible. Here I was inspired by the work of my colleagues at the University of Copenhagen and by a writing course run by them (for which I had guest lectured), which involved a number of experimental exercises.[5] Like them, I drew on writing tools from outside the academy, including Matthew Salesses's book *Craft in the Real World* (2021) and Bernadette Mayer's list of writing experiments (n.d.). Classes therefore involve both exercises to be completed in advance (such as to "choose any non-academic genre of writing . . . and write a short [approximately

[1] ECTS credits refer to the European Credit Transfer System and designate the amount of work a course should involve. At the University of Vienna, one ECTS credit is understood as corresponding to an average workload of twenty-five hours; a five ECTS course therefore involves a total of 125 hours of work, both in and out of class.

[2] While we do not collect demographic information about students, the groups have been broadly representative of Vienna's status as a highly internationalised city and university where German language skills remain central. While PhD courses (including this one) are generally offered in English, students and staff often work in German and may have multiple other languages, representative of Vienna's location as a meeting point between Eastern, Central, and Western Europe. While not the focus of this text, the question of language in academic writing—and the global hegemony of English—is thus often a focus for discussions in the course.

[3] For instance, through the work of Scott L. Montgomery (1996).

[4] Such as the work of Donna Haraway (1988), Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar (1986), John Law (2004), Michel Callon (1984), and Karin Knorr Cetina (1999).

[5] The course is coordinated by Professor Louise Whiteley and is titled Creative Processes for Academic Writing.

500 word] text about your research project in that style") and practical activities during class, such as free writing or a reflective walking exercise. They also incorporate intensive feedback sessions, where students offer close readings of each other's work (based on writing style, structure, and voice rather than on the content or arguments).[6]

The course is organised in five blocks. The first covers extended introductions to other students and to feedback cultures, and it includes discussion of shared and differing experiences of and attitudes toward academic writing. The second asks the question "What is good academic writing?" and puts students' views about this into conversation with debates from the literature around clarity versus the need for specialised language. One goal of these discussions is to highlight some of the limitations of conventional scholarly writing (especially as articulated by Molinari 2022), so the third block then involves genre experiments and critical reflection on what are sometimes called "alternative" academic forms (see, e.g., Richardson 2002 or Ashmore, Myers, and Potter 1995). The fourth block is oriented to responsible reading, citing, and writing (including citational politics and, in later iterations of the course, the use of AI tools in writing). The final block focuses on "finishing" and covers practical strategies for writing, editing, and finalising a writing project alongside discussion of how writing relates to thinking. Throughout, students work with their own writing projects, including article or chapter drafts as well as shorter experimental texts developed specifically for the course.

Teaching Citational Politics as Part of Writing as Thinking

I have already mentioned the work of Max Liboiron as one important inspiration for helping me think about how to develop the course. This was particularly the case when it came to the teaching material oriented to responsible reading, citing, and writing. I had been inspired by Liboiron's work, and especially by the activities and reflections of the Civic Laboratory for Environmental Action Research (CLEAR) around creating feminist and anti-colonial scientific spaces and practices (CLEAR 2021; Liboiron et al. 2017), in my own academic activities (see Davies et al. 2022; Pham et al. 2024). It was, I think, CLEAR's activities around citation (CLEAR 2025)—including a compelling blog post discussing personal experience of "how blindingly good at invisibilizing minority groups these [search] algorithms are" (Hawkins et al. 2021)—that first introduced me to the notion of citational politics. In Writing as Thinking, I ask students to engage with some of this material from CLEAR, as well as to read Mott and Cockayne's text "Citation Matters: Mobilizing the Politics of Citation Toward a Practice of 'Conscientious Engagement'" (2017).[7] In brief, this article summarises contemporary debates around citation; offers a theorisation of it as "a technology of power implicated in academic practices that reproduce a white heteromasculinist neoliberal academy" (Mott and Cockayne 2017, 964); and proposes strategies for practicing citation through "conscientious engagement," including "read[ing] through and count[ing] the citations in their list of references prior to submitting papers as a way to self-consciously draw attention to whose work is being reproduced" (Mott and Cockayne 2017, 966).

Mott and Cockayne (2017) is certainly not the only account of citational politics: A substantial literature has now discussed the biases inherent in citation and publication practices (e.g., Chakravartty et al. 2018; Chatterjee and Werner 2021; Kozlowski et al. 2022; Mascarenhas 2018) and how to respond to these (for instance, by intentionally citing Black women, as proposed in Smith et al. 2021 and Wright et al. 2022). However, because of the centrality of Mott and Cockayne's article both to debates about citational politics and to Writing as Thinking, I draw heavily on it in the reflections that follow below. Based on the Mott and Cockayne text and the other readings, we spend time in class discussing questions such as "What is the 'canon' in your field? What possibilities are there to disrupt it? Do you want to do so?" and Mott and Cockayne's argument that "notoriety in the form of citation cannot make a claim to 'quality'" (2017, 966).

In the three classes I taught between 2022 and summer 2025, students' responses to these texts and ideas were mixed. Similar to myself, the majority of students were initially unfamiliar with the notion of citational politics, and saw it as something that offers a novel perspective on the practice of academic writing. Students were (I think) generally happy to have this idea introduced to them, and were intrigued by it. At the same time, classroom discussions about this material were not always easy. Reflecting on my experiences of the course, I think that students' responses have been helpful in nuancing my ideas of citational politics in (at least) two important ways. First, the complexities of adopting citation as a practice of "conscientious engagement" (to use Mott and Cockayne's term) were often pointed out; second, students frequently expressed a sense of frustration that this was a further (time-consuming) task that they felt was

[6] Of course, one important question is of the extent to which content and form can be separated (see discussion in Schikowitz et al. 2025). My phrasing here is not meant to suggest that these are two separate aspects of academic writing but rather to indicate the focus of students' attention in giving feedback.

[7] Cited, at the time of writing, 366 times, which to me seems a surprisingly low figure given the important arguments laid out in the article and especially that "to ignore the politics of citation risks the continued hegemony of white heteromasculine knowledge production" (Mott and Cockayne 2017, 956).

being given to them in an already stressful and high-pressure academic environment. I will briefly discuss some of the dynamics of each of these discussions below.

First, students were often concerned with what calls such as that made by Mott and Cockayne meant *in practice*. On the one hand, some simply did not agree that they had a choice about their citation practices. Similar to some of the scholars reported in Kwon (2022), these students cited, they said, the texts that captured the ideas or theories that they wanted to make reference to, and they did not believe that there were other texts or authors (writing from more marginalised positionalities) that would offer them an equivalent. On the other hand, others pointed to a danger of tokenism or to the impossibility of adequately capturing the diversity of academia (also discussed by Wright et al. 2022). Mott and Cockayne, in the context of their suggestion that "citation counting is a relatively straightforward way to pay attention to whom we carry with us when we cite" (2017, 966), simultaneously acknowledge that doing so "carries the risk in basing assumptions of gender or cisnormativity on particularly gendered names" (2017, 966). Students were similarly uneasy about the idea that one might be able to intervene in the power structures of academia through trying to identify marginalised scholars by their names and by then inserting their work into their—the students'—texts.

Similarly, students also pointed to the intersectional and sometimes invisible nature of marginality: Perhaps one might be able to cite more women or scholars from the Global South, but how could one support queer researchers, those with disabilities, or others whose marginalisation may not be visible from their writing? Their hesitations thus echo many of the arguments recently made by Maria do Mar Pereira in her analysis of citation debates, in particular her call to move away from either/or logics by suggesting that "citation can either resist or reify, include or exclude" (2024, 6). The students, like Pereira, found citational politics *complicated*. We therefore need, Pereira writes, to find ways of building "alternative political grammars that acknowledge that power in academia is more complicated than familiar binaries – dominant/marginal, cited/erased, insider/outsider, reproducing/resisting – allow us to recognise" (2024, 6).

One answer to such concerns might be to emphasise another point made by Mott and Cockayne, which is that conscientious citation is also about resisting citation as a superficial, extractive practice and that it may thus involve researching and learning "about the people that [authors] cite" (2017, 966). A similar argument is made by Smith et al. (2021). In this view, citation practices should exactly not involve simply making sure that one has an acceptably diverse reference list but instead be a means of developing a research practice that involves deep reading of and familiarity with a diverse range of scholars and scholarship beyond what is (in most disciplines and places) a White, Western "canon." This aim, while certainly desirable, relates to the second discussion point that emerged around citational politics (and other topics) in Writing as Thinking. Simply put, students felt that they were already under extreme, sometimes almost unliveable, pressure: to publish in good journals, to carry out institutional service and/or teaching, to excel in their research so as to ensure the possibility of an academic career (pressures that have been outlined in, for instance, Magoqwana, Maqabuka, and Tshoaedi 2019 and Sigl, Felt, and Fochler 2020). Calls to help correct the pathologies of the research system in which they worked were thus often experienced as a further burden rather than as an exciting opportunity. While students generally agreed with the aims that lie behind discussions of citational politics—the idea that there is a need to disrupt the "hegemony of white heteromasculine knowledge production" (Mott and Cockayne 2017, 956)—they felt that they had limited agency to effect this: On the one hand, they felt that they did not have time for the deep engagement with diverse scholarship that is called for (Smith et al. 2021), while, on the other, they also believed (rightly or wrongly) that such engagement would not aid them in getting published in the prestigious venues they were encouraged to prioritise. As with some other aspects of the Writing as Thinking course, the ideas about citational politics presented were thus experienced as interesting in theory but of limited practical relevance in the "real world" of social science academia.

Our Writing Could Be Otherwise

I do not want to give the impression that teaching citational politics as part of Writing as Thinking was a negative experience or that students were opposed to the idea. As already noted, students in the course were interested in and aligned themselves with the aims of citational justice. My point is rather to demonstrate the ways in which the student discussions that emerged helped me to better understand the complexity and nuance of what it means to attend to citation practices. In particular, these discussions highlighted that calls for citational justice always land into specific contexts and are made sense of through those. The students were less interested in theoretical aspects of citation than in what they could *do* with the ideas presented to them; as such, classroom discussions focused on what it would mean, for them, to conscientiously engage with citation practices. The ideas raised in texts such as Mott and Cockayne (2017) were folded into the rest of their academic lifeworlds and responded to in and through these. In this respect I believe that it is vital

to teach and discuss citational politics *in context*—the contexts and experiences of those of us who produce academic texts but also the context of writing practices generally. As noted at the start of this reflection, I therefore want to propose that it is particularly useful to consider (and teach) citational politics as one aspect of wider academic writing practices. Thinking about how our writing might be otherwise (to use a term from STS; see Bijker and Law 1994) will lead us to consider the politics of citation, but it also opens up broader discussions that are aligned with calls for citational justice: around creating space for epistemic diversity within scholarship, for instance, or generosity and collegiality as aspects of writing.

The value of such broader reflection is well illustrated by one discussion from Writing as Thinking, in which we talk about what students consider to be examples of "good" academic writing and the qualities of these texts that make them "good." One of the aims is, of course, to highlight diversity—that what for some students is good writing is considered the opposite by others. But it is also illuminating to see what emerges from efforts to characterise good writing. Many of the qualities that students discuss are structural: using short sentences, removing extraneous content (à la Becker 2007), using topic sentences for clarity.[8] Some are aesthetic, in the sense of aiming to ensure a particular kind of experience for a reader (using humour, for instance, or crafting evocative vignettes). But others relate to writing as an ethical or political practice. Some students mention "appreciative" or generous writing, for example, in which it is made explicit how the writer is building on the work of others. Others talk about writing that cites non-academic sources or that maintains important terms in their original language rather than attempting to translate them and that thus makes scholarly writing a more diverse space. They make the point that "good" academic writing is writing that somehow engages well with a wider scholarly community and with its politics. It is writing that promotes an ethos of how we want to be as an academic collective, as well as that which clearly conveys a particular argument or set of findings.

Such writing is, of course, very much in line with the ideas from which calls for citational justice have emerged. "Scholars and students have argued," writes Pereira, "that citation of colleagues in marginalised positions is key to tackling epistemic injustice and structural inequalities in academia and society" (2024, 3). The aim is to respond to epistemic injustice and inequality and to make academia a more diverse space; citation practices are one means to this end. As such, it makes sense to consider which other aspects of our writing practices can help to normalise epistemic diversity (the idea that there are multiple useful, robust knowledge practices; see Leonelli 2022 and Ottinger 2022) and resist structural inequalities. Molinari points out, for example, that "the modern-day imaginary of what makes writing 'academic' celebrates objectivity, linearity, some linguistic standards rather than others, prose and impersonality at the expense of other epistemic virtues, such as creativity, public and popular engagement (to democratize knowledge), recursiveness and composition, multilingualism and multimodality" (2022, 57).

For Molinari and others, resisting these assumptions is one means of rendering academic writing more open to diverse knowledge traditions and knowers, and thereby seeking to correct at least some of academia's exclusionary structures. As such, Molinari proposes a range of ways of writing differently (and of encouraging and rewarding such diverse formats), from using visual methods to humour or translanguaged texts. In the same way, the edited collection *Revisiting Reflexivity* mentioned at the start of this text takes as its starting point the idea that "openness regarding the forms that academic knowledge takes" is related to the "need to render the academy more friendly to diverse epistemologies, those that do not present knowing as solely emerging from Western, White, male, cisgender, wealthy positionalities" (Davies et al. 2025, 14). Writing and scholarly representation generally, as with citation specifically, are not innocent or transparent practices. Thinking about how our writing might be otherwise—for instance, with regard to the genres in which we write, or the ethos that we promote through our writing—is one means of considering how academia itself might be done differently.

In practice, this would mean embracing what has emerged naturally in the Writing as Thinking course: not just teaching (and personally reflecting upon) particular aspects of research in isolation (citation, writing, collegiality, feedback) but viewing these as interconnected and context-dependent features of scholarly life more widely. Teaching should thus not only focus on citational politics and practices but on what one reviewer of this manuscript very helpfully termed *conscious scholarship*. The goal is reflection, in and of itself, with regard to students' (or our own) situations, positionality, and commitments. This will further mean accepting that there is no "one-size-fits-all" approach to citational politics (see also Pereira 2024; Wright et al. 2022) or any other of the many challenging and charged dimensions of academic practice. Rather, we should aspire to equip students to "stay with the trouble" (Haraway 2016) with regard to the

[8] The notion of "topic sentences" captures the idea that each paragraph should start with a sentence that summarises its content, as described by Thomas Basbøll in his blog Inframethodology. This is not necessarily an approach I agree with—attentive readers will notice that my paragraphs often do not conform to this rule—but it is one that is cited relatively frequently as aiding clarity.

question of what good scholarship—and writing—looks like, and to create spaces where they might be supported in doing this.[9]

Such an approach also has the benefit that it avoids a checklist approach to citational politics—the temptation, perhaps inevitable in the pressured environments in which we often write, to simply check that our reference lists "look" diverse and to shoehorn in some additional texts if they do not meet this criterion. Contextualising citational politics in writing practices and in conscious scholarship is thus one way of keeping the broader aims of citational justice in mind and of reminding ourselves that it is not citation in and of itself that is at stake. It is rather the nature of our writing, the ways in which we share knowledge and communicate with one another as collectives—and, through that, the kinds of communities (more or less just, more or less open, more or less diverse) that we want to comprise academia.

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[9] I am very grateful to the anonymous reviewer who not only gifted me the term *conscious scholarship* but raised many of the ideas discussed in this paragraph.

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