Writing in the Disciplines: Building Supportive Cultures for Student Writing in UK Higher Education
Lisa Clughen and Christine Hardy (Eds.)
Emerald (2012)
Review by Michael Faherty

One of the better chapters of this book summarises some of the early findings of the British Academic Written English (BAWE) project at Coventry University, a collection of almost three thousand written assessments produced by both undergraduate and postgraduate students across more than twenty academic disciplines. As that collection clearly shows, students studying the various disciplines are not only expected to produce very different types of written assessments but they are also expected to write those assessments in very different ways. Discouraging a ‘one size fits all’ approach to academic writing support, the principal investigator for this project, Hilary Nesi, concludes, ‘Strategies that will gain a student high marks in one context can be irrelevant or even undesirable in another. Students need to develop the ability to write differently to meet different expectations,'
especially as these expectations grow more diverse at higher levels of study, and beyond the university into the world of work.’

Apparently, American universities have mostly moved away from centralised academic writing support services and towards a Writing in the Disciplines (WiD) approach, embedding support within specific writing cultures and the specific expectations of those cultures, while British universities have been rather reluctant to move in the same direction. This approach to writing support, argue the editors of this collection of nine essays, is not about teaching students to write like academics, but offering them opportunities to think, talk and write like biologists, historians and lawyers. In the best chapter of the book, Lisa Clughen and Matt Connell suggest that students need to be welcomed into the culture of the discipline they have chosen to study as soon as possible, offered, for example, opportunities to examine both the form and the content of their lectures and encouraged to talk about their subject in a similar manner, both in small groups and in their written work. As Clughen and Connell note, referencing an essay feels quite different when students feel included in the discussion, not excluded from it, inside the culture and not outside it.

A couple of other chapters also offer excellent examples of how students can be supported to write within their disciplines, including a chapter by Sarah Haas on how to use story cards to help Science students understand academic writing as storytelling and a chapter by Erik Borg explaining just how different academic writing is in the discipline of Art and Design and offering a number of examples of expressive approaches to writing. Since the book’s subtitle is ‘Building Supportive Cultures for Student Writing in UK Higher Education’, it is somewhat disappointing, though, that so few disciplines are covered here. How might tutors build supportive cultures for student writing, for example, in the disciplines of Archaeology or Architecture, Economics or Engineering, Mathematics or Medicine? And given the book’s title, the inclusion of some essays seems questionable, including the chapter by Patrick O’Connor and Melanie Petch on the Writing Group for Research Students at De Montfort University, which tries far too hard to push the square peg of Merleau-Ponty through the round hole of writing a postgraduate dissertation, where even cake assumes phenomenological significance:

Often, although not exclusively, we find that those bringing along their work for peer review will also bake or bring food for the group. This might seem like a trivial act, but through this act of feeding and nurturing others, the embodiment of writing might be realised most profoundly. Food becomes a Eucharistic gesture where participants give thanks for the feedback they have received on their work. The exchange of food seems to replicate the exchange of knowledge.

While writing a postgraduate dissertation probably often feels like a somewhat ‘disembodied’ experience and a writing group for research students is no doubt an excellent example of a supportive, though obviously multidisciplinary, culture, students writing dissertations still exercise their brains a bit more than they do their bodies and sometimes cake is just cake.