

Weh Wi Deh / Veh Vi Is / Where We Are: Teaching and Researching Academic Writing in the Caribbean

Vivette Milson-Whyte, Raymond Oenbring, and Brianne Jaquette

We chose this somewhat unwieldy triple-barrelled title as it reflects the complex linguistic situation of the Anglophone Caribbean, where multiple English-lexifier Creoles (such as Jamaican Creole [Weh Wi Deh] and Bahamian Creole [Veh Vi Is])—all of which developed in the colonial era out of the contact between English and myriad African languages spoken by contemporary Caribbean people’s enslaved ancestors—coexist and contend with international Standard English (Where We Are). Further adding to this complex linguistic situation, the teaching of academic writing in the Caribbean reflects the region’s history of competition between British (through direct colonial rule) and American (through the neo-colonial influence of American media) language variants and educational culture.

Indeed, due to the competing influences of British and American educational discourses and due to the lack of substantial “homegrown” discourses on writing instruction, academic writing courses are known at Anglophone Caribbean postsecondary institutions by various names, including: academic writing, use of English, communication, English composition, writing and rhetoric, freshman composition, English for academic purposes, critical reading and writing, and, finally, academic literacy/ies. Regardless of the name of the class or the approach taken, the development of academic writing instruction in the Caribbean region in the last few decades may be understood as a function of: (a) colonial history; (b) changing cohorts of students; and (c) exposure to developments in writing studies elsewhere (see, for example, Milson-Whyte, *Academic Writing Instruction*, and Oenbring and Milson-Whyte).

Where We Were: A Brief History of Academic Writing Instruction in the Caribbean

For our brief history, we use the example of The University of the West Indies (The UWI), the premier higher education institution in the English-speaking Caribbean. The first postsecondary academic writing course taught in the region was a survey course developed in the early 1960s with a focus on the Use of English (the actual name of the class) at the then University College of the West Indies (UCWI), which was, at the time, still an affiliate of the University of London. Modelling the course on classes then taught in England, UCWI administrators introduced the Use of English in the early years of independence of various Caribbean territories from British colonial rule in

the 1960s. The focus in this course was having the largely homogenous group of high-achieving local students from upper-middle to high income groups consider general “uses of English.” That is to say, this course in its original form was more of a language appreciation course than a composition course in the contemporary American sense.

By the 1970s and 80s, when the student population at The UWI started to become more diverse, there was a gradual shift to considering using language (English) appropriate for university study in general. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, with increasing democratization of education and enrollment of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds whose first language was an English-lexified Creole, UWI faculty and administrators developed parallel strands. Classes for one set of students focused on having them write appropriately in English for university study while the focus in instruction for the other set was on assisting them to write accurately—that is, write using correct English grammar, understood in a very traditional sense. There was still no consideration of including the students’ creole languages in teaching.

Later, in the 1990s and beyond, the focus of UWI faculty shifted to encouraging students to develop university literacies through a course called English for Academic Purposes. This single course offered to nearly all new students on all campuses was modes-based, focusing on exposition. Students in the Faculty of Law and students in their second semester in the Faculty of Humanities also took a course in argument (understood in a traditional modes manner). While retaining an approach that would be described by US colleagues as reflecting current-traditional rhetoric (that US Composition programs had largely abandoned), faculty in Jamaica also began in this period to adopt process approaches to writing and to include writing portfolios in teaching. However, these programs were never truly process-driven, as emphasis largely remained on the product of writing. Later still, in the new millennium and based on faculty interest in and engagements with Writing Across the Curriculum and Writing in the Disciplines, UWI faculty designed courses to help students develop reading and writing skills appropriate for the disciplines in which they study—through courses deemed discipline-specific or faculty-specific (for more on this history, see Milson-Whyte’s *Academic Writing Instruction for Creole-Influenced Students*).

Where We Are Now

Today, some postsecondary institutions in the Anglophone Caribbean retain general labels for courses (such as academic writing) and other institutions, such as the University of The Bahamas (UB), use course titles reflecting the influence of US composition (such as Writing and Rhetoric I / II and Advanced Composition). Elsewhere in the region, there is a move to label

suites of courses as academic literacies courses (as on campuses of The UWI) or as academic literacy (as at The University of Technology, Jamaica) based on interest in academic literacies in the United Kingdom (see, for example, Milson-Whyte, “Re/Engaging Street”). Despite the era or course name and because of a general focus on excellence (rather than also on issues of equity), courses have generally focused on writing in English and on writing as a neutral endeavour.

In a context where the prevailing linguistic attitudes reflect dis-ease regarding the creoles and other non-standard languages of the region, creole languages are not usually accepted in students’ writing. In general, there is really very little engagement with issues of language and identity within the context of writing instruction; the use of English remains largely unchallenged (see, however, exceptions in the work of Jones; Dyer Spiegel; and Oenbring, “The Small Island Polis”). Indeed, outsiders to the Anglophone Caribbean may be surprised that when the creole language or other aspects of students’ linguistic experiences are included in the teaching of academic writing, they seem strange/revolutionary; that is to say, codemeshing and translingualism have not yet broadly taken root in the academy in the Anglophone Caribbean. Furthermore, unlike the situation with Haitian Creole French in Haiti, English-lexifier Creoles lack widely accepted government-supported orthographies (that is, codified sets of spelling). Generally, students who wish to write in English-lexifier creoles must deploy seemingly ad hoc eye dialect spellings (as we did deliberately in our title) to represent their creole language.

Where We Are Going

Our recent edited collection, *Creole Composition: Academic Writing and Rhetoric in the Anglophone Caribbean*, came out of a need for more scholarship on teaching writing in the Caribbean. While there were great ideas about teaching academic writing in the Caribbean being circulated in local spaces (that is, among faculty on campuses), there was little communication across islands. Additionally, there was a lack of scholarship that addressed the specific needs of instructors and students in the region (see, for example, Oenbring, “College Composition” and Milson-Whyte, “Academic Writing in the Caribbean”)—with most of the (sporadic) research on teaching academic writing in the Anglophone Caribbean coming from the traditions of applied linguistics and/or education (see, for example, Rose). Although scholarship on rhetoric and composition in the US or academic literacies in the UK could be applied to teaching in the Caribbean, it couldn’t address all of the circumstances of teaching in the region and could sometimes feel like a repetition of colonial and imperialist structures, where knowledge about the local place came from outside in a top down manner rather than from those actually working on

the ground. This was a hindrance to instructors, administrations, and our students.

When writing the CFP and selecting chapters to go into *Creole Composition*, we sought to have a wide-range of contributions. For example, we wanted to represent a spread of the countries and islands that make up the region; we were interested in having scholars from diverse academic backgrounds, such as composition, literature, and linguistics; and we looked at the issues from classroom perspectives and administrative perspectives. This diversity is reflected in the organization of the book itself, which moves from reflection on the linguistic situation in the Caribbean to sections on attitudes to learning and time management amongst students, to ideas about language “errors” in writing. The encompassing scope of the book has, no doubt, contributed to its positive reception. There has been a recognition of the need for such a project, and this recognition includes winning two major awards: the Mina P. Shaughnessy Prize from the Modern Language Association and an Outstanding Book Award from the Conference on College Composition and Communication.

In the afterword to *Creole Composition*, we pointed out the need for an active and engaged regional body in the Caribbean focused on the teaching of academic writing. Fortunately, since the publication of *Creole Composition*, the still-fledgling Caribbean Association of Tertiary-level Academic Literacies Practitioners (CATALP) has become more active. Nonetheless, as we have intimated throughout this piece, the systematic study of the teaching of academic writing is still relatively new to the Caribbean. Accordingly, the opportunities for strategic partnerships between institutions and organizations within and outside the region, and for research, are extensive. (Raymond is a member of the executive committee of CATALP, and he welcomes those who may wish to discuss strategic partnerships with CATALP and/or UB.) While those of us who study academic writing in the Caribbean are limited in our resources, we share a desire to craft a uniquely Caribbean set of pedagogies that, while drawing on the best of international research in writing studies, reflects the distinctiveness of the Caribbean sociolinguistic, historical, and cultural situation.

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