

“ASK THE PROFESSOR” about ... ‘COLONISED WRITING’

Professor Alison Jones writes:

A recent conversation with some Māori students reminded me of a common anxiety:

“I am worried that in writing my thesis I will become more ‘colonised’ in my thinking, because I have to conform to western academic conventions. My Māori being will get lost”.

This worry is worth discussing because it can be crippling, and lead to thinking that is self-defeating. Some students feel so ambivalent that they take far too long to finish their thesis, or give up altogether, blaming the limiting demands of the academy. Others approach their thesis in a half-hearted manner, thinking they can just ‘get’ the qualification without hard work. They are prepared to tolerate a less-than-high-quality thesis because it is ‘only’ a western credential, in the coloniser’s language, written to someone else’s rules, and therefore not *really* them. Many have families who are proud of the qualification, and who display the thesis as a revered object, unaware of its high or low quality as a piece of research and writing.

I wish to make five points about the risk of ‘becoming colonised’ through doing high-quality academic written work.

1. The anxiety about losing one’s sense of cultural identity and expression in the process of engaging with the rigours of academic writing is a legitimate anxiety. Unfortunately, it can be used as an excuse for not doing good work, or not facing a serious lack of academic confidence (alarmingly, but not surprisingly, common amongst Māori students) – but it is an anxiety worth having. It indicates that the student is aware of a number of *real tensions*: between the demands of writing in an academic context and the demands of everyday discourse; between the expectations of the community and the expectations of the academy; between the collectivist demands of whānau [family] and the isolationist demands of writing; between the authority of the student/community and the authority of the supervisor; between the beauty of poetry and story-telling and the beauty of empirical evidence and linear argument... . At another level, the anxiety is a recognition that the specific requirements of academic writing are a culture in themselves, quite different from the cultures with which we are more familiar. Awareness of all of these tensions is crucial to facing realistically and positively the demands of academic prose. The contradictions cannot be resolved necessarily, but they can be critically discussed, and may even find a place in the thesis as the writer comes to explore these interesting, and even necessary, tensions in indigenous students’ writing process.
2. The next two points may be a little more difficult to swallow, but I think they are very powerful. This second point is, to put it crudely, ‘horses for courses’. If you would *really* rather write poetry, waiata or haka [songs, chants], a memoir, descriptive biography, or political slogans, *without analysing them in the form of a written thesis recognised by a university...* then do the poem or memoir, *not* an advanced university degree! Don’t stress out about the university’s lack of vision in accepting your brilliant creation; do your own project with enthusiasm, outside the university system. One of the reasons higher degrees from universities are so valuable, and often provide access to better jobs or more authority, is because they (usually) provide excellent

training for the ‘power work’ of modern society (I return to this in the points below). In order to do this power work via getting an advanced credential provided by the dominant/elite institution of the university, you are compelled to follow its conventions. By following the established writing rules you are credentialed to become more authoritative in most aspects of powerful society (though not in tribal or iwi contexts, necessarily).

3. Perhaps I *would* say this because I am a professor: I deeply believe that academic writing conventions are worth learning, for producing written arguments of the highest possible quality and rigour. That is why I run academic writing workshops in ‘how to structure an academic argument’ and ‘how to write a good paragraph’. My classes are not run by me just for the fun, even though I enjoy them a lot. I believe that being able to write a logical argument based in legitimate evidence, being able to use the right sequence of words to nail a point, and being able to form beautiful prose, are immensely important. Good academic writing is imperative, not just because it can be beautiful and fun, but because it is probably the most powerful political force in the world (behind religion and violence...) – which leads to my next point. (Before I go to it, I’ll say this: thesis writing full of unconvincing illustrations, sloppy referencing, bad grammar, untested assumptions, political clichés, lack of clarity and too much or too little information about what we already know on the topic, is weak, not powerful, writing. Who wants to waste time doing that?)
4. Getting advanced university credentials, and completing these to a high standard can be seen as the *opposite* of ‘colonising’. The ongoing social and political work to ensure justice, including social-economic resources, for Māori/indigenous people requires training and skill learned in completing excellent writing at university level. In other words, the university can provide powerful strategies for ensuring Māori power, including academic power as more Māori academics contribute to the evolution of ‘what counts’ as good degree work.
5. Finally, the most important and controversial point. It is possible to argue that the university is a Māori space; that academic writing is Māori writing. To assume that the university must always be coloniser or Pākehā [white settler] or masculine... space is to concede too much. Why *must* the university lecture theatre or the university essay always be foreign territory? When we understand the spaces / skills of the university as *Māori* spaces / skills, we can more easily see good academic writing skills as beneficial tools in the multi-faceted ‘cultural toolbox’ of Māori. When the ancestors enthusiastically took to reading and writing 200 years ago they did not think that doing this work would make them Pākehā; they no doubt believed that reading and writing would become a *Māori tool*, as it did become.

Of course, that initial engagement with reading and writing was in the Māori language, and the later-enforced immersion in English led to a less enthusiastic response. This remains a problem in the modern university. Although some students do write their theses partly or fully in te reo Māori [Māori language], not many today have the sophisticated understanding of the language required for the sustained argument of a higher degree. Greater numbers of future students and academic staff will gain the necessary strength of language. This will not, of course, solve the problems of academic work for Māori. Some say that the Māori language, due to its metaphorical and rhetorical structure, its oral nature, and its passive or oblique voice, is in deep contradiction with the linear, direct, active, written structure of standard academic prose. Future Māori scholars and professors in the university will continue to contend with that argument and find a good way through.

Write to Alison at: a.jones@auckland.ac.nz