Working Papers in

Urban Language & Literacies

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Working papers
for a more open academy

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What contribution can working papers (WPs) make to a more open academy, and where do they stand in current debates about Open Science? They used to provide speedier publication and feedback as well as cost-free/low-cost access, but with the availability of digital repositories like PURE or ResearchGate, do WPs still have a role? To answer these questions, this paper refers to *Working Papers in Urban Language & Literacies* (WPULL; www.wpull.org). It argues that WPs can play a significant role community-building around shared interests, and within an overarching commitment to deliberative, dialogical reasoning, WPs can be more flexible in genre and audience than a journal, and more responsive to circumambient situations and events – key qualities if applied linguistics focuses on 'real-world problems' that require the attention of a variety of stakeholders. Building on a principled understanding of knowledge-making as a situated cultural practice, WPs can be open and reflexive about their geo-historical grounding, provide a view of academic work 'in the round' rather than just in its highly styled end-products, and make a low-tech contribution to intellectual decolonisation. Where a standardising universalist model of Open Access might see working papers as sloppy and elitist vehicles for self-promotion, the case of WPULL argues for the substantial contribution that WPs can make to a vigorous and more open economy of knowledge.

Where do working papers stand in current debates about Open Science, and what contribution can they make to a more open academy? Where do they feature in the uneven global circulation of knowledge? Indeed, do they still have a part to play in an era of open access repositories like PURE, Academia.edu etc? After sketching the difficult and conflicted landscape in which academics have to operate, we will introduce the series that we are involved with, *Working Papers in Urban Language & Literacies*. We can't say how representative they are, but we will use them as a case-study with which to consider the contribution that working papers can make to four kinds of opening up: first, what they can offer applied linguistics in particular; next their significance broadening the view of knowledge work we're given; third their challenge to the dominant ideology of Open Science; and last, their contribution to decolonising the academy.

Let's start with the contemporary academic environment in which working papers have to operate.

1. Uneven, contested and changing terrain

To get a sense of current conflicts over the global economy of scientific knowledge, it is worth considering the issues around journal publishing (journal articles often being seen as the paragon towards which working papers aspire).

Journal publishing forms part of a large infrastructure of universities, publishing companies, government ministries and research funding bodies that act as "centring institutions", producing the normative common sense of academic life, "emanat[ing] authoritative attributions [of significance & value] to which one should orient in order to make sense" (Blommaert 2005:251,75).[1] Ideas and models of 'good' science and the practices emblematic of *being* a 'good' scholar or *doing* 'good' research circulate through this infra-structure at various scales – local, national, regional and global – and as they do so, they produce quantifications of academic contribution, h-index hierarchies and rankings, lists of the more cited academics, as well of course as the visibility of some researchers and the marginality of many others. Academics self-regulate and orient themselves within these ideologies to get recognised in, say, academic promotion and project funding, and in the neoliberal rationalities governing the system, individuals feel personally responsible for the levels of success or failure that they manage conforming to these expectations (Rose, 1989; Fraser, 2003).

This academic infrastructure ties into the global system of academic publishing in at least three ways. First, there is a pervasive understanding that 'good' scientists publish in English and that 'good' science is showcased in 'international' journals with high impact factors. As a result, according to Puerhringer and Griesebner (2021), academic publication gets concentrated in five publishing companies which control three quarters of the market (Wiley-Blackwell, Springer Nature, Elsevier, ACS, and Taylor&Francis). They make massive profits, but there is no payment for the highly specialised work of authors and reviewers. Second, there is very unequal access to these journals if you don't know English and work at an underfunded institution – translation costs are high, but you are excluded from the global arena without it. This leads, third, to the uneven circulation of scientific knowledge and unequal access to journals along geopolitical lines. Journals that aren't published in English and/or don't emanate from the global North's academic publishing monopoly are devalued and become unattractive as publication outlets.

Of course there are important challenges to this infrastructure and its effects, alongside alternative forms of being and doing in the world of academic publishing. This can be seen in a number of collective initiatives emerging across different regions over the last decade or so: the ALAEC Manifesto for the Responsible Use of Metrics in Research Evaluation in Latin America and the Caribbean (2021); The San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment ('DORA', 2012); The Leiden Manifesto for Research Metrics (2015); and the Helsinki Initiative on Multilingualism in Scholarly Communication (Federation of Finnish Learned Societies et al., 2019). These initiatives call for a change in the ways that higher education systems define and attribute value to academic work, and they challenge the globalised economies of scientific knowledge production fuelled by the international journals. They question mainstream metric systems and the ways that they legitimate specific types of research and language. They stress the need to strengthen, spread and protect national and regional infrastructures that encourage more open science as well as multilingualism. They call for more appropriate metrics and indicators to evaluate local and regional science. And they promote the use of alternative databases to compete with the ones that currently dominate the landscape of international academic publishing – see, for example, Latindex

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[1] With well over 30 papers, Blommaert has been a major contributor to WPULL.

(www.latindex.org/latindex), LA Referencia (www.lareferencia.info/es), SciELO (www.scielo.org) and RedALyC (www.redalyc.org/).

A lot of these efforts and arguments are fairly well-recognised in debates about open science, and as editors of international journals, Rod and Miguel are in a good position to participate in this large-scale struggle over the production and circulation of scientific knowledge. But where do working papers fit into this?

In so far as they are usually locally produced in particular universities and have quite a small circulation, it might initially look as though they lean away from Elsevier et al, and you can certainly find a lot of them in alternative open-access data-bases like Latindex and LA Referencia. But actually as already mentioned, working papers have traditionally functioned as a rehearsal space for international journal publication, and you can also find a lot of them on privately-owned open access repositories like Academia.edu and ResearchGate. In high techno-capitalist style, Academia.edu offers us a lot of the same features as a professional social networking site – a 'real-name' profile page, complete with picture (CV, details of professional affiliations, biography and employment history); a set of metrics to detail the number of followers; an analytics dashboard that allows one to monitor the views of one's work – while at the same time, it aggregates all one's work in trending data that it sells to the one trillion-dollar-a-year R&D sector (most of it made up of corporations such as pharmaceutical firms) (see Hall 2015).

So it is not immediately obvious where working papers figure in this political economy of knowledge, and indeed whatever their stance, whether it's Academia.edu, ResearchGate, Scielo, Latindex or PURE university archives, digital repositories themselves make one start to wonder whether working papers still have any point. Historically, working papers have provided a short-cut past the slow journal publication processes of peer-review, revision, proofing etc, but now so do digital repositories. If the authors want it, Academia.edu and ResearchGate also offer their readers space for comments, and of course they allow readers to circumvent expensive journal paywalls as well – indeed, academic publishers themselves seem now more open to the posting of pre- and post-prints. With these newer digital resources providing speed, feedback and cost-free access, key differences between a working paper and a journal start to look like potentially fatal disadvantages: in the absence of comprehensive expert peer review, the quality threshold in working papers is lower; they lack Impact Factor metrics and have lower value in job selections, promotions and CVs; and getting published in a working paper series is less to boast about because they tend to draw on a narrow (and often institutionally specific) pool of contributors and there is less competition for space. So actually, why on earth would anyone bother to write a working paper, let alone spend time editing a series of them?

Let's explore this by looking at a particular case, *Working Papers in Urban Language & Literacies.*

2. Our case study: *Working Papers in Urban Language & Literacies*

The *Working Papers in Urban Language & Literacies* (WPULL) first appeared in hard copy in 1997, but it started posting everything up on Academia.edu in 2014, capitalising on its

analytics and the notifications it sends out as well as the speed and accessibility it offers. Over the period 2014-2022, it managed to be one of most visited pages of academia.edu (often in the top 0.1%), getting over 130,000 views from all over the world for its 300+ papers – which averages out at well over 1500 views a month or 50+ a day.

WPULL still posts on academia.edu but it now also has its own website which allows readers to search the collection much more efficiently (www.wpull.org). When it first went digital, the papers were posted on the King's website. But they weren't designed to showcase the output of a single institution, and when the series started to carry university logos (WP23), there were three institutions (King's, Ghent and SUNY). Now there are five (King's, European University Cyprus, UCL, UFRJ and UWC), and King's has been the only one throughout.

The series has always had a clearly stated theme and mission, and as such it is more like a journal than just departmental working papers – the mission is to develop "sociolinguistic, applied and educational frameworks adequate for the analysis of ~~urban~~ language, literacies, interaction and learning; [as well as] modes of intervention in language policy and practice that are productively tuned to the realities of contemporary ~~urban~~ life".[2] But whereas journals carry the most authoritative knowledge from wherever it emerges, WPULL's guiding concerns have served as gravitational points for developing quite close and active interactive networks of people with similar interests. This network-building started small, with close collaboration with a few of other 'hubs' in different countries, and it has gradually extended so that WPULL is now officially based in four cities – Cape Town, London, Nicosia and Rio (though of course contributors themselves come from a wide range of countries).[3]

The scholarly article has been WPULL's primary genre (even though papers have often needed further work before getting published in actual journals), and this expresses a foundational commitment to academic rationalities. But the series is also committed to community-building and to practical intervention beyond the academy, potentially connecting with non-academic professionals as well, and as a result, there is much more generic flexibility than journals typically offer. So as well as journal-type articles, WPULL also carries end-of-project reports, reports on meetings, interviews, book reviews, teaching notes, CPD texts for language teachers, manifestos, dialogues, position statements and personal reflections; there are no word limits and contributions range from several hundred words to over 30,000; WPULL has just posted its first paper in a language other than English (WP312); contributors aren't competing for limited space, so there is room for work from other disciplines if it is thematically relevant (e.g. WP107; WP202; WP209; WP214; WP250; WP301) and overall, there is a lot of scope for generic experimentation.

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[2] 'Urban' has been dropped from the latest iterations of this statement, which now refers to "sociolinguistic, applied and educational frameworks adequate for the analysis of language, literacies, interaction and learning; [and] modes of intervention in language policy and practice that are productively tuned to the realities of contemporary life"

[3] There are WPs from authors based in and/or coming from: Bangladesh, Belgium, Brazil, Catalunya, China, Cyprus, Denmark, Germany, Hong Kong, Kazakhstan, Morocco, Philippines, South Africa, Sweden, UK, Ukraine and the USA

But what broader significance can any of this have? Let's take this in stages, starting with the distinctive ways in which this kind of publication contributes to applied linguistics.

3. Emplaced flexibility as an Applied Linguistic virtue

There are at least two features of WPULL that lend themselves to applied linguistics as an academic programme: its flexibility about the genres of writing that they publish, and its emplacement in particular locations.

It is often said that applied linguistics is 'the theoretical and empirical investigation of real-world problems in which language is a central issue' (Brumfit 1995:27), and of course real-world problems involve a variety of stakeholders. For stakeholders, journal articles are often inaccessible and boring, but the generic flexibility of these open access working papers means that they can engage with stakeholders in formats they are more comfortable with – short papers, for example, in very conversational styles.

Real-world problems also tend to emerge in particular places at particular times, and as result, there are also potential benefits in the fact that working papers tend to be explicitly *emplaced* publications, grounded in particular institutions, embedded in interactions within specific networks, often linked to groups and organisations quite nearby (as well as to alumni and particular network partners in other countries). So recently, WPULL has been publishing a series of papers that reflect ongoing discussion with the ESOL practitioners around the Hub for Education & Language Diversity at King's[4] - indeed quite a few teachers have been drawn in as co-authors, sometimes leaning towards more traditional journal formats with the support of university collaborators (e.g. WP106, WP234, WP300). And there is a broadly similar sense of emplaced engagement in working papers posted from the University of the Western Cape (e.g. WP132, WP169, WP242, WP259, WP301).[5]

Beyond this relevance to applied linguistics, there are a number of other ways in which working papers can help to open up academic knowledge production, and we can start with the fuller, more rounded picture of university life that they can offer.

4. Opening up about knowledge work

As their name indicates, working papers are 'works-in-progress', and it is sometimes said that they are as much 'performative' as 'substantive' (Timcke et al nd:2). As such, they draw more attention to the processes of academic production than you usually find in highly polished products like the journal article. This is especially true when working papers

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[4] See the collection at https://wpull.org/product-category/hub-for-education-language-diversity-held/. The Hub is a collaboration between academic and third sector organisations, with King's and English for Action figuring prominently. See www.kcl.ac.uk/held.

[5] The work in both London and Cape Town aligns with the notion of 'Linguistic Citizenship' (LC), which is an approach to language and education developed by Christopher Stroud and colleagues in southern Africa. LC is committed to democratic participation and voice, to linguistic diversity and to the value of sociolinguistic understanding, and there is a recent account of it in WP317, as well as a collection of relevant papers at https://wpull.org/product-category/linguistic-citizenship/

accommodate the variety of text types found in WPULL – not just articles but also "end-of-project reports, reports on meetings, …. teaching notes, CPD texts… manifestos…. personal reflections". Indeed seen like this, maybe working papers can be considered more as windows into

> "universities [as] a… 'social asset, produced by the effort of many thousands of workers and students over long periods of time'[,…. universities as a] catalyst for the professional development of society as well as responsible for (directly or indirectly) much of the 'critical thinking and imagination in culture and politics' (Connell 2019:8)" (Bock et al 2022:2).

Certainly, we can get a much richer view of university work than journal articles provide if we take, for example, the issue of authorship. In a working paper series, there is scope for writing from a range of structural positions at university, as can be seen in the two following examples.

In contemporary British universities, a lot of people are employed on teaching contracts that exclude them from the big UK quinquenniel research review, the REF. But these people are often active in academic-related work – action research, practitioner support, service in the community as well as teaching – and they need arenas to promote and evidence their work. Working papers provides a place for people on non-research contracts to get their work read and noticed, and in this context, rather than being a staging post on the way to prestigious journal publication, working papers are a useful destination in themselves.

Of course for students, working papers are very well-established as a stepping stone to journal articles. But in a working paper, the editorial dialogue that feeds the final product can be much more sustained, nurturing and collegial than the impartiality of the blind peer review that journals provide. More than that, when high-quality MA or undergraduate assignments are turned into working papers, the gap between producing and consuming knowledge narrows and indeed more generally, when topical, hot-off-the-press, warts-n-all working papers are included in reading lists and debated in class, maybe students gain a livelier sense of participating in an intellectual community of practice than they get from just working through the canon on its own.

This is not to deny that academic papers are usually strengthened by thorough and impartial peer review, and we are certainly not suggesting that working papers are the best place to find out about the full range of a university's activity. *Even so*, as and when particular issues arise, working papers provide space for commentary on how particular fields like applied linguistics get affected by academic structures and processes that are normally hidden in the background. They may not be a very tidy and efficiently indexed space for this reflexivity, but when a working paper carries reflexive discussion of an organisational issue in the academy, it is a sign that (a) the issue in question has broader relevance to academics elsewhere, and (b) that the issue calls for careful, critical, deliberative reasoning, extending the analytical seriousness associated with academic papers to their own contexts of production. To see this, it is worth looking at, among others, Blommaert's critique of EU funding ([WP184](#)), Bock's account of southern African textbook production ([WP259](#)), Rampton & Cooke's report on collaboration between universities and third sector

organisations (WP281), Matras' retrospection on the Multilingual Manchester project (WP307), or Suleiman's account of sociolinguistics in Jerusalem (WP313).

So working papers can be very explicit about their geographical, historical and institutional embedding, and this actually feeds a deeper critique of traditional ideas about Open Science.

5. Challenging the ideology of standardised neutrality in Open Science

The idea of 'Open Science' covers a range of very different issues,[6] but arguments for open access in scientific publishing usually seek to neutralise the significance of location and the unequal resources with which location is so often associated. Instead, they insist on explicitly agreed criteria for selection and access, and call for assessment to be based on the quality and suitability of a submission regardless of where it comes from. Within this frame, it is vital, for example, to establish "some distance… between authors and editors in order to create the conditions needed to establish objective judgment and quality control" (Packer 2009:121).

We don't question the importance of equalising opportunities to access and contribute to highly rated scientific resources; we have already acknowledged the value that anonymous peer review can have; and with all of its editors regularly publishing in it, we accept that WPULL fails on the measure of author/editor distance. But the priority that this model of Open Access gives to universality, standardisation, anonymity and context-independent objectivity doesn't exhaust the idea of openness. Indeed, if we refer back to the geo-political economy of scientific knowledge sketched at the outset (§1), there is a case for saying that the flag of standardised neutrality actually masks a very skewed and exploitative global system, privileging some and marginalising a great many others.

We cited earlier a range of alternative manifestos, declarations and databases that fight this bias, but they tend to have a strong base in natural science and usually stick to traditional notions of objectivity, seeking to reform the system rather than challenge its epistemological foundations. But the social sciences and humanities generally go much further with the idea that knowledge is socio-historically conditioned, and *reflexivity* about this contextual conditioning is often itself seen as making a substantial contribution to the rigour and potential significance of a piece of work (e.g. Burawoye 1998). So when science and knowledge production are reframed as cultural practices like this, with reflexivity treated as an epistemic discipline, there is a good case for saying that our working papers practice a different type of scientific openness, adopting a different approach to broadening the circuits of ratified academic knowledge production. Indeed, this connects quite directly with arguments for the decolonisation of epistemic relations between global North and South.

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[6] See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open_science

6. Addressing North/South academic inequalities

Claims about the universality of knowledge produced in the global North are a central target in decolonial critiques of the academy, which call instead for its 'parochialisation', uncovering the situated assumptions and conditions underpinning it – its 'locus of enunciation', (Mignolo 1994, 1995; Menezes de Souza 2019; Diniz De Figueiredo & Martinez 2019). All knowledge has its locus of enunciation, and when working papers attend to their emplacement in particular environments and carry reflexive commentaries on contexts of production alongside traditional papers, they contribute unashamedly to this parochialising disclosure of local particularities.

Material wealth also plays an important role in North/South academic inequality, and journals, libraries and databases all require a lot of money, labour, technology and time, resources more available in the North. But working papers are cheap, low tech and as we have tried to show, close to ordinary university business, just one step up/back from the supervising, presenting, teaching, coordinating etc that academics are already doing, wherever they are. As such, they are a practical and sustainable platform for participation and the formulation of voice in collective projects above and beyond the confines of one's institution. Working papers obviously don't stand at the pinnacle of scholarly achievement, but equally, offering (among other things) a rehearsal space for journal articles, they can't be called a distraction from what universities prize most highly. The uncomplicated process of setting up a working paper series bestows editorial control, and there is also the potential for a series to operate across a number of editorial hubs, North and South, something that we are now doing in WPULL.

7. Conclusion

So working papers have quite a significant part to play in ongoing efforts to re-think knowledge production beyond the exploitative, profit-making and exclusionary processes that currently dominate academic publishing. Of course that is not to say that the series we have described has completely seceded from the mainstream academy. As an editorial team, we recognise the importance of publishing in conventional academic journals and help people to do so; we only published our first paper in a language other than English this year in [WP312](); we continue to use the techno-capitalist platform provided by Academia.edu alongside our own website; we welcome efforts to set up systems and databases that challenge the big northern publishing houses, even though we don't necessarily share the same epistemologies; and most crucially, we are committed to deliberative, dialogical reasoning as a core academic ideal. But we are very clear that we don't want WPULL to be a journal, submitting to the mandates of profit and ranking that drive the global academic publishing system. Instead, like a lot of other working papers, WPULL draws on a different logic of value attribution, building on collegiality, symmetry, open peer review, free-of-charge publication and open access. And with locally embedded editorial hubs in different places, it's a *trans-local* operation that the series aspires to, not a global one.

Summarising more specifically what working papers can offer, they can be more flexible in genre and audience than a journal, and more responsive to circumambient situations and

events. Within a principled understanding of knowledge-making as a situated cultural practice, they can be open and reflexive about their geo-historical grounding; they can provide a view of academic work 'in the round' rather than just in its highly styled end-product; and they can make a low-tech contribution to intellectual decolonisation. Indeed wherever you are, working papers are simple to produce, and as such, they can contribute to an experience of academic freedom. This experience of freedom contributes a lot to the sense of value and purpose in university work, but it is not always very easy to maintain within the market rationalities currently governing higher education.

Invoking the universal model of Open Access, working papers in general – and WPULL in particular – have been called vehicles for sloppy and elitist self-promotion (Pavlenko 2019), and of course nobody's going to like whatever comes out in a particular series. But that is a very narrow view.[7] Instead, working papers contribute to a vigorous and more open economy of knowledge, in ways that these notes have tried to illustrate.

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[7] Contrast Rampton 2021 account of Blommaert's work in WP280.