

ACADEMIC LITERACIES AND CHANGING UNIVERSITY COMMUNITIES*

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ABSTRACT

The 20th century saw dramatic changes in academic values and disciplinary knowledges in the new humanities and social sciences. Student populations, further, are changing and the notion of academic literacies is being contested. The teaching of academic literacies, in the plural sense, sees learning to write in the academy as learning to acquire a repertoire of linguistic practices which are based on complex sets of discourses, identities and values. Here, students learn to switch practices between one setting and another, learning to understand, as they go, why they are doing this. Students, further, might wish to challenge the academy and what it requires of them. This paper discusses these issues as well as suggests ways in which we might respond to this complex and evolving situation.

KEY WORDS: Academic literacies, student populations, disciplinary discourses, dissertation writing, generic competence.

RESUMEN

El siglo XX fue testigo de cambios drásticos con respecto a intereses académicos y conocimientos disciplinares. La población estudiantil, además, se transforma y la noción de habilidad académica está siendo sometida a juicio. Un enfoque de las habilidades académicas, en sentido amplio, interpreta el aprendizaje de la prosa académica como la adquisición de un repertorio de prácticas lingüísticas que se basan en un conjunto complejo de discursos, realidades y valores. De este modo, los alumnos aprenden, a medida que avanzan, a ejercitarse de diferente forma en uno u otro contexto, así como a saber las razones que lo justifican. Lo que es más, quizás los estudiantes desean desafiar la Institución y sus requisitos. El presente artículo analiza dichas cuestiones a la vez que sugiere formas con las que podríamos responder a esta situación compleja y en evolución.

PALABRAS CLAVE: habilidades académicas, poblaciones estudiantiles, discursos disciplinares, redacción de tesis, competencia genérica.

1. INTRODUCTION

In his book *A University for the 21st Century*, James Duderstadt (2000), a former President of the University of Michigan, says there is no question that uni-

versities will change in the new millennium. It is simply a matter of how they will change and who will change them. As Duderstadt points out, the university has changed considerably over time, from its founding days as a school of medicine at what is now known as the University of Bologna, through to the range of universities that we have today, many with quite different aims and purposes, serving quite different sets of student bodies. And they will continue to change (Rojstaczer 1999, Coady 2000).

We have also seen changes in the nature of education—from what Duderstadt calls ‘just in case’ education, through to ‘just in time’ education, and ‘just for you’ education; that is, from the kind of education which gives students knowledge and skills that they might, at some time, draw on in their future lives, through to more specially career-focused and customized education which aims to meet the particular needs of students and particular areas of professional and academic practice.

And the place of education in the world has changed as well. As many countries have moved from truly domestic economies, “worldwide communication networks have created an international marketplace, not only for conventional products, but also for knowledge professionals, research, and educational services” (Duderstadt 2000: 18).

2. THE POSTMODERN TURN

At the same time, we have seen dramatic changes in academic values and disciplinary knowledges, especially with what has been called the ‘postmodern turn’ (Best and Kellner 1997) in the new humanities and social sciences. In many areas of study, there has been a major paradigm shift as we have moved from a modern to a postmodern world. Study areas such as English are a clear example of this where, if we look at the courses of study available today in an English department, we may see subjects being taught such as ‘Imagining Hollywood’, ‘Queer Theory’ (University of Melbourne 2001) and ‘Buffy the Vampire’ (Madden 2001) which are dramatically different both in terms of content and perspective from what we might have seen, say, ten, and certainly twenty years ago. We are now entering what Best and Kellner have described as “new and largely uncharted territory between the modern and the postmodern” and “a new paradigm through which the world is viewed and interpreted” (Best and Kellner 1997: viii).

We are no longer so certain that truth is an objective reality that is ‘out there’ that can be seen and objectively described. As Best and Kellner (1997: ix) have observed, the postmodern turn “leaves behind the safe and secure moorings of the habitual and [the] established”. It requires embarking on a voyage into new

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ways of thought and experience where there is a different constellation of values, beliefs, and assumptions, from what might have been held in the past.

3. ACADEMIC TRIBES AND TERRITORIES

There are also substantial differences between what Tony Becher (1989) calls ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ disciplines and ‘convergent’ and ‘divergent’ areas of study (Thompson 1999); that is, areas of study such as pharmacy and medicine where members might be more tightly knit in terms of their basic ideologies, judgments, and values, and other areas of study such as geography and cultural studies where the borders are less clear and where techniques and perspectives are often absorbed from neighbouring intellectual territories and where, as a consequence, the range of acceptable procedures may vary much more, and there may be quite different views as to what is considered ‘research’.

Becher describes each academic discipline as an academic tribe which has its own academic culture, its own sets of norms, its own bodies of knowledge, its own modes of inquiry, in short, its own academic territory. Sometimes students can ‘border cross’ (Swales 2000) between these academic territories and sometimes they cannot. These borders, however, are becoming less and less clear. An area which illustrates this is the comparatively new academic discipline of health studies which one might think would see itself as a hard discipline in the way that Becher describes medicine, but is in fact an extremely divergent area of study which may have much more in common, say, with education and social sciences in terms of its view of knowledge and research, and the borders it might cross, than it may have with medicine.

These academic tribes and territories are not, however, monolithic and unitary (Hyland 2000). As Hyland (2000: 9) points out, academic disciplines “are made up of individuals with diverse experiences, expertise, commitments and influence”. There may be considerable variation in the ways in which members of these disciplines identify and agree with the goals, methods, conventions, histories, and values of their academic community. Not everyone might agree, even though they might engage with each other, and disagree with each other, in agreed ways (Hyland 2000).

4. CHANGING STUDENT POPULATIONS

Student populations, further, are changing. There is, for example, a growing gap between today’s student population and the academic staff that teach them. Today’s students, Duderstadt (2000: 22) points out, “come from very different backgrounds than their teachers; they have different intellectual objectives, and they think and learn in different ways”. They are far more diverse in terms of race, gender, nationality and economic background than the people who teach them, creating new tensions in academic teaching, particularly at the undergraduate level of university education (Duderstadt 2000).



This is especially the case with what people working in the area of ESL education have called ‘generation 1.5’ students (Harklau et al 1999a); that is, students who have graduated from secondary school and enter university but who are still in the process of learning English. This includes migrant students and local residents born abroad, as well as indigenous language minority students, who are becoming a major constituency in university programs across the world. These students have characteristics, and needs, that are different from those of international students and different from those of local native speaker students. Some of these students may, indeed, give the appearance of being native speaker students yet in many ways, are not. These students have a wide range of language proficiencies in both English and their first, or other, languages, in their language affiliations, and in their academic literacy backgrounds (Harklau et al 1999b).

Duderstadt (2000) argues that this shift in our populations is so dramatic that by the late 21st century, the United States could become a nation of minorities, without a major ethnic group. The United States is not the only country, however, where this is happening. For example, 30 percent of the present population of Auckland was not born in New Zealand (Little 2001). This high proportion of overseas born local residents is true of many other countries in the English-speaking world. For example, 40 percent of Australians are migrants or children of migrants. Indeed, 25 per cent of Australia’s current population was born overseas and more than half this number was born in countries where English is not the language of education (Dufficy 2001). These overseas born residents comprise a significant proportion of our universities’ current and future student populations. This has enormous implications for our academic communities and how we respond to them.

5. THE NOTION OF ACADEMIC LITERACIES

Even the notion of academic literacies is changing. There are those who would see academic literacy as a singular phenomenon, comprising a set of skills to be acquired that can then be transferred to other contexts. The view here is of ‘problems to be fixed’, with an emphasis on surface features of the text, such as grammar and spelling. A further view would see the development of academic literacy as a socialization process through which we explain ‘university culture’ to our students so they can learn its requirements through a kind of apprenticeship. Here, there is the assumption that in the university there is one ‘culture’, whose norms and practices simply have to be learnt in order to have access to the institution. An academic literacies approach, in the plural sense, views “student writing and learning at the level of epistemology and identities rather than skill or socialization” (Street 1999: 3). It sees learning to write in the academy as learning to acquire a repertoire of linguistic practices which are based on complex sets of discourses, identities and values (Lea and Street 1998). Here, students learn to switch practices between one setting and another, learning to understand, as they go, why they are doing this, and what each position implies (Street 1999).



6. CHALLENGING THE ACADEMY

Students, further, might wish to challenge the academy and what it requires of them, asking to play a stronger role in shaping their academic goals than has traditionally been the case in the past. Benesch (2001) describes how she works with minority language students at City University of New York and how she encourages them to question the *status quo*, asking questions such as ‘Why are things the way they are?’, ‘Who decides?’ and ‘What other possibilities are there?’ Benesch’s aim is to democratize her classes by engaging students in decisions that affect their lives both in and out of the academy. By encouraging her students to consciously engage in academic life, she aims to increase their participation not only in the academy, but also in the workplace and in the community. Drawing on the work of Freire (1994), she argues that “teaching that simply perpetuates the *status quo* without the possibility of changing current conditions is training, not education” (Benesch 2001: xviii). From Freire, she takes the notion of hope—for a vision of greater dialogue in academic classes, and a greater joy in learning.

7. GENERIC COMPETENCE AND ACADEMIC LITERACIES

One of the aims, then, of a university education is the acquisition of what Bhatia (2000) calls ‘generic competence’; that is, the ability to engage with and participate in new and recurring genres in academic and professional settings. In academic settings this includes a wide range of genres such as academic essays and assignments, research projects, theses and dissertations, academic lectures, tutorial discussions, seminar presentations, teacher-student consultations, administrative enquiries, and conversations with other students. Students are also required to read and understand a wide range of written genres, such as specialist academic texts, research reports, university handbooks, degree regulations, course outlines, assignment guidelines, as well as interpret the written feedback that they get from academic staff. In some areas of study, such as communication studies and business, the range of genres is even greater. This situation is further complicated by different areas of study, and academic staff within them, having different ideas of what a text, such as an academic essay or a research paper, should look like, and what it should say. Sadly, there is no such thing as *the* academic essay or research paper (Johns 1997).

Bhatia defines generic competence as being different from, yet including, both linguistic competence and communicative competence. That is, it includes both mastery of the language code (linguistic competence) and the ability to use textual, contextual, and pragmatic knowledge (communicative competence) to interpret and create contextually appropriate texts (generic competence). Generic competence is not simply about the ability to reproduce discourse forms (Berkenkotter and Huckin 1995). It is the ability to understand what happens in real world interactions and use this understanding to participate in real world communicative practices (Bhatia 1999).





Clearly, then, academic literacies development needs to focus on more than just the development of students' linguistic competencies. To effectively use an academic genre, students also need knowledge of the culture, circumstances, purposes, and motives that prevail in particular academic settings. Participation in a genre means much more than producing a text that looks like the ones that are usually produced in particular settings (Dias et al. 1999). Genre knowledge also includes an understanding of the social and cultural contexts in which genres occur as well as how these factors impact upon the language choices made within them.

Notwithstanding, much work on literacy development, until recently, has been heavily focused on language issues. While this is clearly necessary, it is not, however, sufficient for our students to succeed in the academy. Previous research into academic literacies has shown that even native speaker students are not always aware of the university's or their department's expectations of them (Lea & Street 1998). This is even more difficult for students who have come from a context where the conventions and expectations of academic writing may be quite different to the situation they now find themselves in (Ballard & Clancy 1997, Swales et al forthcoming). This may include students born abroad as well as students who are progressing on to university from secondary school. It is easy to forget that the goals of a secondary school education are often quite different from those of a university education. For example, one of the goals of secondary school education is to help students do well in public examinations so that they can gain admission to the university and academic program of their choice. In some cases, this means the goal posts have been set very high. This is especially the case with students wishing to get into areas of study such as law and medicine as well as into particular high ranking universities. A secondary school education is not necessarily about how to write an undergraduate essay in history, geography, or cultural studies, even though aspects of each of these areas of study may have been covered in the secondary school curriculum. The culture of the secondary school is also very different from that of the academy. To really know what matters in a university, in some ways, you have to have worked there. We certainly cannot blame our secondary school teachers for not having worked in a university and for not having an inside view of what counts in the academy.

Much of what a student needs to know in order to use an academic genre, then, exists 'beyond the text' (Freedman 1999). While textual knowledge is clearly an important part of genre knowledge, so too is an understanding of the social and cultural context in which the text is produced and assessed. This is not in any way a simple issue, especially when many of the things students need to know are not openly expressed and need to be inferred from the particular situation.

SOME EXAMPLES:

At the University of Melbourne, I taught a course on thesis and dissertation writing for ESL students from a range of different countries and a range of different disciplines. I was constantly struck by the questions that my students asked in these classes. These students knew they had language needs and that, notwithstanding

having met the university's English language entrance requirements, they still had to develop their level of language proficiency in order to produce texts which would be acceptable to their target readers. I found, however, that their questions were mostly about what Bhatia (1999) calls 'social knowledge' and 'genre knowledge', rather than 'textual knowledge'; that is, they mostly asked about non-linguistic aspects of the genre they were writing rather than about its particular linguistic features. I will illustrate this by way of some examples.

The kind of questions my students asked were often about the people who played the most crucial roles in their achieving their ultimate goal—their examiners and their supervisors. For example, they often asked how many examiners they would have, who chooses their examiners, if they would know who their examiners would be, and if their examiners would be from their own university. For someone who has worked in a university, the answers to these questions might seem obvious, but not all English language universities, in fact, deal with thesis and dissertation examination in the same way. For example, theses and dissertations in British universities tend to have fewer examiners than in US universities. Also, in Britain, only one of the examiners may be from the student's own institution whereas in the US they may all be from the student's institution. In Australian universities, often none of the examiners is from the student's institution. In some New Zealand universities, the supervisor may also be an examiner and therefore play two roles – both teacher and assessor. So how does the student know what role their supervisor is playing and when? They might wonder (and often do) 'If I ask for too much help, will it look like I don't know what I'm doing? And how will this affect my examination?' In other settings, the students may not know who their examiners will be and, indeed, may never know. Very often thesis students are in the situation of having to write for an imagined reader, not knowing who it really might be, what their reader might value, and what he or she might want to see.

My students also asked questions such as how many supervisors they should have and what they should expect from them. For example will their supervisor choose their research topic for them? And will their supervisor help them with any revisions they have to make after they have been examined? One student was certain he would be able to return to his country once he had submitted his thesis and his supervisor would do all his revisions for him. I told him to check on this!

Students also often asked questions about what they are actually *required* to do in order to be awarded their degree. For example, one student had been told by her supervisor that her thesis had to be a set of publishable research articles yet it was clear to her that not every student in her department was doing this. Did she have a right to negotiate this, and if so, how should she go about doing this? As Benesch (1999) has argued, our learners may be able to negotiate in some academic settings, perhaps more than they might have thought they could. But this is not something many students in such high stakes situations, however, might easily do.

Students often asked "What *is* the difference between a masters and a doctoral thesis?" and—the big question—"What will their examiners will be looking for in their thesis?" They also asked questions such as: "How do I show what I know?" and "What do you *mean* by 'originality'?"



Other times the questions were more about the student's research methodology such as: "Can I gather data before I get ethics approval for my study?" (No), and "What do I do if my results don't 'come out' as I expected?" (Say so). Other typical questions included: "How long should my thesis be?" —a seemingly obvious question which many of my students did not know the answer to. Or they knew the maximum word length, but not what might be considered 'enough'. And, of course, the answer to this question varies from discipline to discipline. What Maths and Science, for example, may consider 'enough' may not be enough in some other areas of study.

Some students asked 'What do you *mean* by a critical review of the literature? In my country it would be entirely inappropriate to do this. The author is the expert and who am I to question what they say?' Indeed, this notion of critical analysis is often in direct conflict with some of our students' cultural backgrounds and past educational experiences. Angelova and Riazantseva (1999), for example, report on a Russian student who said that where she came from it was dangerous to criticize people in authority as this would be seen as an act of subversion, and should be avoided. Their Indonesian students said similar things. Scott (1999) reports on a Korean student who describes the notion of critical thinking as an ongoing struggle. As Alastair Pennycook (1996) points out, critical thinking is a culture-specific western idea, even though it is presented in the literature as a universal norm.

In terms of linguistic knowledge, the kinds of questions my students asked were often ones that are not dealt with in books aimed at helping them improve their academic writing. These sorts of questions included: "Is it okay to use different tenses in the same sentence?" (Yes), "Does 'cited in' mean I haven't seen the original study?" (Yes), and "Does my examiner *expect* me to have seen the original study?" (Yes).

Now, all of this may seem somewhat obvious to someone who has supervised many theses or dissertations. Most people who have the task of helping students with thesis and dissertation writing, however, probably have not. Some students' teachers, further, may not have completed a thesis themselves in their professional preparation, so may not, in fact, have ever written the kind of text they are helping their students to write. Or if they have written a thesis, it may have been at a university or in an area of study which is substantially different from that of their students. Thus, what to experienced academics might seem like common knowledge, to a great number of their students (and at times their teachers), is not.

8. STUDENTS AS RESEARCHERS

Johns (1988, 1997) recognizes this difficulty by suggesting that we train our students to 'act as researchers' as a way of helping them write texts which meet the institutional and audience expectations of their particular field of study, as well as discovering the knowledge and skills that are necessary for membership of their particular academic community. Students can be asked to examine expectations in particular areas of study, and the purpose of the pieces of writing they are required



to produce. They can be asked to identify key points of view and values in their area, as well explore the kinds of knowledge claims which are permissible in their areas of study (and not).

Students can be asked to consider the social and cultural context of the text they are writing, the role, and purpose of the text they are writing, and what might be considered appropriate content for their text. They should consider the intended audience for their text and the relationship between them as writers of the text and their teachers and assessors as readers of their text. This includes an examination of the background knowledge and understandings it is assumed they will share with their readers. Within this context, we can ask our students to observe and describe how and why language is used in particular ways in the genres they are learning to write. The reasons for this use, they will discover, are very often 'outside of the text' and not internal to their pieces of writing.

As Johns (1997) argues, we cannot hope to predict all of our students' possible literacy experiences and requirements. We can, however, help them to ask questions of the texts they are required to produce, and the contexts in which these texts occur. In this way, we can help our students negotiate academic literacies (Zamel & Spack, 1998), learn the conversations of their disciplines (Bazerman, 1980; Flowerdew, 2000), and find out what counts in their area of study.

9. IMPLICATIONS FOR UNIVERSITIES

So what does this mean for our universities? First of all, we need to recognize the importance of developing high level academic literacies—in the plural sense—as an important outcome of university education. We, therefore, need to be committed to the development of academic literacies throughout our universities: in our faculties, in our academic departments, within each of our programs, for all our students (Little 2001).

We need to support our academic staff by providing them with professional development to help them foster the development of academic literacies in their particular area of study, and to help them learn how to make explicit to their students what they want them to do and what they want them to know. We also need to provide a comprehensive range of language and learning support systems for our students. All of this is crucial if we are to understand, interact effectively with, and provide education for students from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds, with a wide variety of needs.

The key issue in the development of academic literacies is not about declining literacy standards but rather about meeting new social, cultural, and educational requirements. Even well-prepared students may struggle with the oral, written, and visual multiliteracies (New London Group 1995, 1996, Cope and Kalantzis 2000) required of them in a 21st century tertiary education (Little 2001).

As the New London Group (1995: 3) has argued, effective citizenship and productive work now require us to interact by using multiple languages, multiple Englishes, and multiple communication patterns “which more and more frequently

cross cultural, community, and national boundaries”. Our students need to be taught how to demystify these multiliteracy requirements if they are to understand the culture and context of academic knowledge and participate in the discourses of the academy and their future lives.

10. CONCLUSIONS

Clearly, then, more than knowledge about language is needed for students to succeed in academic settings. Language *is*, however, important. The aim of this paper is not to argue against helping students with particular language issues. The research in ESL education, at least, shows that feedback on language *does* lead to improved student writing (see e.g. Ferris 1999, 2000). This, however, is not enough. Students also need to focus on the social and cultural contexts in which the genres they are writing are located in order to understand how these impact upon the language choices they might make within them.

Focusing on aspects of genres ‘beyond the text’, then, provides a context in which students can gain access to discourses which will, hopefully, enable them to participate more successfully in their future lives. Writers such as Delpit (1988) argue strongly for the teaching of the genres of power saying if you are not already a part of the culture of power, being explicitly told the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier. Luke (1996), on the other hand, argues that learning dominant genres leads to uncritical reproduction of the status quo and does not necessarily provide the kind of access we hope our teaching might provide for our learners. Others argue that *not* teaching genres of power is socially irresponsible in that it is the already disadvantaged students who are especially disadvantaged by programs that do not address these issues (Christie, 1996; Martin, 1993). As genre theorists such as Christie and Martin have argued, teaching about genres does not exclude critical analysis of them, but rather provides learners with the necessary base for analysing, critiquing, and, indeed, challenging them (Hammond and Mackin-Horarick 1999).

As Bazerman (1988: 319) reminds us, a genre “is not simply a linguistic category defined by a structural arrangement of textual features”. There is a need to go ‘beyond the text’ into the social and cultural context which surrounds the genre, in order to fully understand its purpose and use. Students need to be aware of this as much as they need to have command of the language they need to use to perform particular genres. As Zamel and Spack have pointed out, “it is no longer possible to assume that there is one type of literacy in the academy” (1998: ix). It is our responsibility to help our students develop strategies that will enable them to negotiate the varied and changing literacies they will meet in their academic and future lives.

We no longer have a fixed, homogeneous student body with the same social, educational, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds —or with the same educational wants, and needs. We need to recognize and value this diversity and see it as a strength, rather than a weakness. We need to view our student body as contributing to a rich multi-cultural, international learning environment, rather than taking



a 'remediation' or 'problem-fixing' approach to the development of academic literacies (Little 2001). We need to provide an inclusive learning environment for all our students, which values where our students have come from, yet takes account of the complex and changing demands of where they are going.



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