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Positioning reading as academic literacies: the pedagogical experience of academic staff

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Abstract: This paper explores the status of reading as an element of academic literacies. Academic literacies as a field has tended to focus on alterative conceptions of academic writing, but there has been less elaboration of reading pedagogy. Theories of reading have developed in the humanities, and also, the idea of reading competence has been examined in terms of cognition. In higher education, reading instruction has been implemented to foster students' reading criticality in terms of study skills, but the fundamental status of reading has been neglected. To address this, this research analyzes staff discourses on reading pedagogy. Five academics and four librarians were interviewed. While the academics and librarians all understood the importance of student reading, the provision of sufficient support seemed to be challenging. A future challenge is to offer an adequate theoretical account of student reading.

Paper:

1. Introduction

This paper aims to conceptualize the position of reading as an element of academic literacies. Reading has increasingly been included in interventions aiming to improve 'study skills', but the disjunction of this from the curriculum has been raised from the perspective of academic literacies (Lea & Street, 1998)in terms of socio-cultural and ideological strands. Academic literacies illuminates academic writing (Wingate, 2006), but less critical attention has been paid to the practices of reading (Ivanič, 2009)or to staff's related pedagogical experience. Thus, reading as an aspect of academic literacies is worth focusing on in this research.

2. Literature review

To locate reading as an element of academic literacies, I will review the trajectory of how reading has been understood. Theoretically, perspectives have been proposed from within the humanities (Manguel, 1997; Raven, 2018). The roles of reading have also been critically explored in relation to the book (Howsam, 2014).

Reading interventions have been introduced in the context of study skills (Adler & Doren, 1967;Kornhauser, 1993).There, the discrete components of reading are described as 'skills' (Barton, 2007), framed in ways that make them easy to measurable. However, this approach has been criticised from the perspective of academic literacies, lacking of the socio-cultural aspect of reading.

For higher education, reading has also been discussed in terms of 'student engagement' (Kuh, 2003)and in order to realise 'engaged critical reading skills' (Douglas, Barnett, Poletti, Seaboyer, & Kennedy, 2016, p. 245). There, students' experience is the focus, as opposed to pedagogical aspects of the intervention (Aldridge, 2019). To move beyond a focus only on assessment (Mann, 2000), as Lea (2013) suggests, investigating staff's pedagogical experiences of developing reading is necessary, in order to specify the place of reading in the curriculum.

Thus, this research focuses on staff's pedagogical experiences of student reading, and attempts to locate the socio-cultural position of reading as part of academic literacies. 'Pedagogical experiences' refers to staff's sense-making of curriculum design and the development of reading pedagogy. To offer a fuller view of reading pedagogy, librarians' experiences are also focused on. Working on this conceptualization contributes to academic literacies, and theoretical principles for practitioners.

3. Methodology

An in-depth case study was conducted in a UK social-science institution. Semi-structured narrative interviews were conducted with five academic staff and four academic librarians. The table below summarises participants' attributes.

Academic staff		Academic librarian		
Name	Role	Name	Experiences (Years)	Role
Kevin	-	Jane	20	Manager
Marcia	-	Monica	25	Subject liaison librarian
Susan	Convenor	Sandra	1	Subject liaison librarian
Julia	Manager of the Programme	Lucy	15	IT support information literacy
Naomi	-			

The interviews lasted for 30-60 minutes. All the accounts were recorded and analysed thematically based on a close reading of the transcripts. This study received institutional ethical clearance and followed approved procedures for informed consent, including guarantees of anonymity and confidentiality. Participants' names are pseudonyms.

4. Findings

I will focus here on discourses that address reading. The participants were all aware of the significance of critical textual reading. However, there was a dichotomy between academics and

librarians about whose role it was to address reading. For example, Kevin talks about how they teach reading to students in his module.

I haven't made any agenda to teach them about skills. That hasn't been issue for me, [...] because I see my role mainly teaching about theories, issues, debate within my area.

Kevin was less interested in the skill aspect of reading, considering this 'somebody else's problem'. Teaching generic skills is presumed to be subordinate, compared to teaching disciplinary content. Sandra, by contrast, declares that her mission is to:

direct them to what we have and teach them how to actually search efficiently and evaluate and cite them in the reference.

Sandra's priority lies in information searching as an underpinning component of students' literacy practices.

These accounts suggest a fundamental difference in their recognition and sites of disjunction concerning reading. Academic staff may assume that students learn the functional skills outside the curriculum, meaning that these are not their responsibility. The academic librarians' position however does offer information skills outside the curriculum. These differenes are socially influenced by their roles, and cause disjointed practices in the curriculum.

Furthermore, Lucy acknowledges the current challenges for academic staff. While academic staff may assume that students learn reading outside the curriculum, Lucy cautions against this, arguing that students' actual practice does not demonstrate that they are able to work in preferred ways.

One of the challenges is that academics make about what students are already good at. You know, how many times I go to them and say, ' You are making the assumptions that [...] they know what scholarly journal is.' But there is an issue to deal with, a kind of perception among many academics.

Although Lucy emphasizes the risks observed in the perceptions of academic staff, she does not mention any specific aspects of students' textual practice. Proper support of reading was not identified.

5. Discussion

As academic literacies suggests, reading as a skill does not make sense in the context of the disciplines: Academics reject the notion of 'decontexualised' reading, and librarians, in contrast, tend to design skill programmes outside the curriculum. This shows that appropriate pedagogy for reading has not yet been embedded in disciplines. Furthermore, reading theory does not cover the social-cultural nature of reading, even though reading has increasingly been raised as an important aspect of student engagement. Future work could focus on conceptualizing reading as socio-cultural practice and make visible emergent pedagogies of disciplinary reading.

6. Conclusion

This paper has argued that the pedagogical experience of academics was not reflected in contemporary discussions of reading practice, or in research into academic literacies. A future challenge is to investigate emergent reading pedagogies.

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