

Belonging and community: Academic literacy and identity in higher education

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

In this paper, we analyzed our experiences, challenges, and possibilities for building communities in higher education, focusing on academic literacy practices. Our Brazilian research team includes a diverse group in race, class, sexuality, gender, and levels of formation (undergraduate and graduate students, newly graduated schoolteachers, and a university professor). Participating in academic communities reshapes our comprehension of academic literacy (Trusting et al., 2019): a social practice rooted in dialogue, power dynamics, and identity. Shared experiences in research and study groups turn writing, reading, and discussing into flexible collective acts that change who we are as thinkers and researchers beyond institutional walls. For many of us, these communities are spaces of re-signification — we learn how to speak the “academic language” while simultaneously questioning, adapting, evolving, and enriching it with our voices, experiences, and opinions. Thus, academic communities provide both support and the seeds of transformation.

Full paper

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In our experiences, the emotional bonds lead us beyond mere academic interaction, strengthening a sense of belonging and collaboration. Furthermore, the personal interests of each member served as drivers of collective engagement. For example, the reflections brought up by colleagues aroused empathy and created spaces for representing and

expressing distinct voices, which is essential for reshaping the university into a truly participative learning community (hooks, 1994).

Moreover, classes and research meetings based on circles of conversation (Freire, 1967) functioned as open spaces for active listening, valuing diverse and unique academic experiences. These meetings offered a welcoming space for exchanging ideas, sharing thoughts, and supporting each other, promoting an actual knowledge exchange. This dynamic strengthened our sense of community and fostered personal and collective growth, enabling innovative approaches and new perspectives within the academic context.

Still, creating a community is not without difficulties. Upon entering higher education, we struggled to connect intellectually and socially with our peers, professors, and ourselves, as the diversity of our backgrounds hindered our unifying as a group. We were from different generations, with references and experiences that, at first glance, may represent barriers to understanding each other's aspirations and desires. Different perspectives may sometimes lead to misunderstandings or discomfort, as differences in training and life experiences can create barriers to connection. Paradoxically, it is precisely in these moments that the capacity for growth is more evident. The willingness to engage with unfamiliar ideas and confront one's own assumptions is what transforms these gatherings into spaces for genuine learning. By participating in study and research groups, carefully and respectfully listening to our peers, and learning from their doubts and ideas, we created a community. Since controversies and disagreements are negotiated respectfully, they can improve knowledge-making.

Professors are part of this journey. Even as we question whether we will be capable researchers, we rely on study groups and the ones who guide them. That same guidance, however, often carries the anxiety of not meeting the expectations we believe they have. Conversely, while engaging with the academy, we strengthen our bonds with the professors/lecturers and share personal affinities, dreams, and struggles for intellectual projects. Cultivating an academic community is not simply gathering researchers working on similar themes or having common interests and/or practices. It requires creating an inclusive and supportive environment where interactions among students, peers, and professors surpass the bounds of lectures and projects. The relationships and networks in these spaces often become sources of ongoing support, collaboration, and inspiration. They influence academic success, personal resilience, and the ability to navigate complex social and professional environments; these experiences are fundamental to individual and collective transformation.

Participating in academic communities reshapes our comprehension of academic literacy (Trusting at al., 2019): a social practice rooted in dialogue, power dynamics, and identity. Shared experiences in research and study groups turn writing, reading, and discussing into flexible collective acts that change who we are as thinkers and researchers beyond institutional walls. For many of us, these communities are spaces of re-signification — we

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