

## Talking about writing in higher education (0052)

Stubleby Rachel <sup>1</sup>, Nicola Woods<sup>1</sup>, <sup>1</sup>*University of Wales, Newport, Newport, South Wales, United Kingdom*

The process of widening participation, and the growth in diversity of the student body, is well documented. A university such as ours has large numbers studying for professional and other qualifications, many of them mature students, many of them part time. Demands from within the academy (e.g. to be competitive), and from outside it, mean that the HE curriculum is broadening too. Taken together, widening participation and the broadening curriculum mean there is a greater diversity of communication and discourse practices amongst HE students than ever before.

Yet this diversity is regularly viewed in deficit terms (what students lack), and addressed mainly through “study skills” provision, outside of mainstream academic studies. This approach sees academic writing as a set of generic transferable skills, constituting a transparent medium for representing knowledge. Lea and Street (1998, 2006) challenge this view, and argue that academic literacies are multiple and highly context-specific. The language practices of HE reflect the traditions of particular subject disciplines, and are crucial in *constructing* subject knowledge, rather than merely *representing* it. We suggest that, as academics, we need to analyse our own writing practices in much more depth and detail, in order to be able to articulate to students what we require of them.

But this is only part of the challenge. The second area for consideration is the positioning of students themselves towards HE. A top-down, apprenticeship model of learning (including the acquisition of academic literacy) may have been relatively unproblematic where the student body was broadly monocultural (white, middle class, British, school achievers etc) and shared most of the values and aspirations of the HE institutions themselves. But the (largely) undisputed “master-apprentice” hierarchy of the old system is questionable when students have such varied identities, life experiences and (therefore) discourse practices. We build on the work of Lillis (2003) and Hirst et al (2004) in looking at *what students bring* to HE, in terms of their own literacy practices and their developing identities as writers. A Critical Language Awareness perspective (Ivanic and Simpson 1992, Clark and Ivanic 1997)

also informs the research, examining issues of power and identity in academic literacies, and contesting the inevitability of any particular genre convention.

This paper presents work from the first phase of our research project, which seeks to understand students' feelings about, attitudes towards and experiences of academic writing. We adopt a critical ethnographic approach, meeting 53 volunteer participants in 12 focus group sessions. Students are studying on both in-service and pre-service teacher education courses, and are a mixture of undergraduates (60%) and graduates (40%). These are predominantly working-class students, some of whom went to university straight from school, but most of whom returned to university as adults. The majority (80%) are women, and over 25 years old. As such they are broadly representative of teacher education students at Newport.

The focus group discussions, which we recorded, transcribed and are currently analysing, had three main areas of enquiry as their starting points:

- What makes a good academic essay?
- How do you develop/have you developed your academic writing?
- Are you free to give your own opinions in your academic writing?

Emerging themes include:

- Using a new language There is a great deal of humorous discussion regarding the perceived pomposity/artificiality of the language of educational discourse. Beyond this, there is evidence of students "trying out" new terms, sometimes quite awkwardly or self-consciously. The sense emerges that students have insufficient opportunity to practise (and therefore become fluent in and comfortable with) this new language, except at summative assessment points, where the stakes are particularly high.
- Orientations to writing assignments Many students express instrumental attitudes to written assignments, conforming to conventions as best they can because they have to. The varied emotional content of these discussions is interesting. Some students, more or less cynically, "play the game" to get the grades; some question the supremacy of required conventions, but feel unable to challenge this in practice;

others are thoroughly disheartened, unsure that they understand what is required. Beyond the “conformists” however, there are a small number of students who talk with real enthusiasm about their writing, seeing it as a valuable part of their learning and engagement with new ideas.

- The academic-vocational relationship Whether confident or not in their own writing, many students question the value of academic literacy, and perceive a mismatch between developing their professional practice, and the academic skills by which they feel they are being judged. Only a minority feel that the academic writing process helps them develop excellence in teaching.

Based on our findings thus far, future work will focus on the following areas:

1. Developing understanding of our own discourse practices As academics, we need to move beyond the view recorded by Lea and Street (1998:163) where we “know a good essay when [we] see it but ... cannot describe how to write it”. Critical Language Awareness (e.g. Clarke and Ivanic 1997) provides a framework for analysing, and thus being able to articulate, the kind of writing we expect from our students.
2. Developing pedagogy Students need opportunities to become fluent in the language of their discipline, to experience the relationships between theory and practice, to understand the link between academic discourse practices and “being a brilliant teacher in the classroom” (as one student expresses it). This requires us to allow space for students’ *own* language and experiences, and to develop a dialogic approach (Lillis 2003, Hirst et al 2004) in our learning, teaching and assessment activities.

Plans for future research and practice therefore include:

- Critical discourse and language analysis of academic writing (including student work) in teacher education and other subject disciplines. This may include:
  - desk-based linguistic analysis
  - further dialogue with students on aspects of the writing process, as they experience it
- Working with academic colleagues to develop:

- critical awareness of subject-specific discourse practices
- critical, dialogic *and* subject-specific approaches to developing student writing

## References

CLARK, R. & IVANIC, R. (1997) *The Politics of Writing* London: Routledge

HIRST, E., HENDERSON, R., ALLAN, M., BODE, J. AND KOCATEPE, M. (2004) *Repositioning academic literacy: Charting the emergence of a community of practice* in *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy* 27, 1 pp 66 - 80

IVANIC, R. AND SIMPSON, J. (1992) *Who's who in academic writing?* in FAIRCLOUGH, N. *Critical Language Awareness* London: Longman

LEA, M. R., & STREET, B. V. (1998) *Student Writing in Higher Education: an academic literacies approach* in *Studies in Higher Education* 23, 2 pp. 157 - 172

LEA, M. R., & STREET, B. V. (2006) *The "Academic Literacies" Model: Theory and Applications* in *Theory into Practice* 45, 4 pp 368 – 377

LILLIS, T. (2003) *Student Writing as 'Academic Literacies': drawing on Bakhtin to move from Critique to Design* in *Language and Education* 17, 3 pp.192 - 207