

Developing writing at university: extending tutor-student dialogue, understanding and practices in academic writing (0163)

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Part 2 Outline

Despite the on-going development of new literacy practices in universities (particularly through the use of technology), conventional academic writing maintains its privileged position in universities, and students are still largely judged on and through 'essay writing'. My research explores the writing experiences of new and practising teachers as they study for teaching qualifications at university. I also examine teacher educators' expectations for students' writing, and the rationale(s), as understood and articulated by them, for requiring developing teachers to engage in academic literacy practices (even where these are not strongly related to professional writing requirements). My research uses a qualitative and broadly ethnographic Literacy Studies approach to explore these themes, through interviews and focus groups with tutors and students as well as accounts of, and critical reflections on, my own and other teacher educators' practices in supporting students' writing.

Over thirty years ago, Shirley Brice Heath's ethnographic study of three communities in the Southern USA (1983) demonstrated how a lack of awareness of diverse language and literacy practices outside school, and a 'normalisation' of (middle class) practices inside school could lead to damaging deficit interpretations of children (e.g. children interrupting others' stories seen as naughty, rather than as using the collaborative narrative practices of their home communities). As Lea and Street argue (1998, 2006 and Street 2004), a parallel lack of awareness of the social and cultural dimensions of written language still exists in universities. Academic writing (and writing in general) is regularly regarded as a transparent medium of representation, and thus a set of technical skills (spelling, referencing conventions), rather than practices which construct, and are constrained by, a range of epistemological, social and cultural values. In another parallel to Brice Heath's classic study (op cit), this can lead to over-simplified or deficit views of student writing and of ways of working with students to develop writing.

The work of Literacy Studies scholars (e.g. Street 2004, Barton and Hamilton 2012) makes visible the ways in which writing practices are situated socially to serve a variety of purposes. In such research, texts and the practices which inform their production are described and analysed within their social and cultural context. An acceptance of the socially-situated nature of literacy practices provides the starting point for my research into academic literacies. A key aim of my research is to attempt to make academic writing conventions and practices more visible, in order that they can be engaged with, evaluated, perhaps contested, to enhance the learning and professional development of both student teachers and faculty. Related to this is my further aim: to contribute to the development of a more dialogic approach to academic writing development (Lillis 2003, 2006), where opportunities are afforded to student writers themselves to influence genre conventions, and which is more in keeping with the student-centred ethos of teacher education, which sees “education and knowledge as processes of inquiry” (Freire 1996:53).

I am inspired here by the work of Clark and Ivanic (1997) and Lillis (2001), who put (student) writers at the centre of the study of academic writing. The identities (student) writers bring to their writing, and how this affects their engagement with the genre they are (re)producing, is key to developing understanding of and support for students. Lillis notes the “individual [student] desires for meaning making, which both converge with and diverge from essayist literacy practice” (Lillis 2001:162). Students recognise the power and authority of conventional ‘essayist literacy’ and the access to cultural capital afforded by the successful use of this powerful literacy practice. However, they may also wish for “greater connection between academic meaning making, personal experience and [their] senses of personal and social identity” (Lillis 2001:162). With this in mind, my conversations with students include exploration of their ‘writing lives’ outside the academy, the domains where writing has meaning for them, and the practices and identities involved. My preliminary findings show students engaging in a rich variety of literacy practices outside the academy for purposes related to work, personal relationships, and their identities and aspirations as human beings. What is striking is how little we, as tutors, ordinarily know about our students as writers, and the literacy practices they engage in, outside of their studies (see Ivanic et al 2009 on this phenomenon in UK colleges of further education and how this, too, leads to deficit views of students’ ability and potential). This aspect of my dialogic research with students is enabling

me to explore how much (or how little) of their experience as a writer is (can be) acknowledged and used in the development of an academic writing identity.

As well as learning from student experiences of writing for academic and other purposes, I am interested in problematising 'essayist literacy' as a genre (or collection of genres) relevant to the professional development of teachers. There are two threads to be teased out from my findings so far. Firstly, the precise nature of teacher education writing requirements (i.e. genre conventions) is a challenge for academics to articulate. This reflects Lillis' observation that academic writing remains a practice "constructed in and through conventions which are often invisible to both tutors and students" (2001:75). Secondly, teacher educators identify widely differing reasons for requiring trainee teachers to engage with 'essayist literacy'. A conventional rationale for developing academic (or indeed wider professional) literacies is that the writer is writing their way into a discourse community with which they (wish to) identify. What is emerging from my focus group discussions with teacher educators, and from reflections on my own and others' practice, is that there is no clear agreement as to the discourse communities available or aspired to by trainee teachers. Such communities as there are have "unresolved boundaries, with many different fluid communities of practice which exist in a variety of relationships to one another, both supporting and competing" (Barton and Hamilton 2005:25). The final aim of my research is therefore to support the development of academic writing in teacher education by making more visible this complex discourse world.

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