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Referencing and inclusion: exploring barriers to agency in the higher education student experience (0135)

Karen Gravett¹, Ian Kinchin¹ *University of Surrey, Guildford, United Kingdom*

Abstract

This paper examines the challenges experienced by students when developing referencing practices. There has been little research into students' development of their referencing skills, with referencing often considered a mechanistic skill. In this study we argue that, rather, referencing is an area of practice imbued with issues of power and identity, and that discursive and cultural practices can lead students to feel excluded, and to exhibit a lack of agency - ultimately, a form of educational 'frailty'. Worried about plagiarism and confused by feedback, rather than developing the independent research skills we would wish, students look for direction and report feelings of anxiety. These themes are explored using questionnaires and interviews with a small number of undergraduate students. Based on the findings, this article concludes by making recommendations for widening our understanding of the less visible exclusions students encounter, the need for further discussion and potentially greater scaffolding and support.

Student experience research domain

Introduction

The academic practice of referencing is usually considered to be a rudimentary skill that students must quickly master to write at an acceptable level, and not worthy of particular attention. However, in this paper we argue that, rather, referencing has become a critical but often opaque academic convention, and an area of practice imbued with issues of power, identity and non-belonging. Referencing has only intermittently come to the foreground as the primary focus of research. This prioritisation is important as for today's students, developing academic literacies at University can be an unsettling experience, with referencing in particular a 'strange discourse' promoting 'a sense of self-as-intruder in the new institution's space' (Hutchings 2014, 313). Ultimately an understanding of the significance of this area of academic literacy, and of its role as a 'threshold practice' in the construction of student identity (Gourlay 2009), has implications for both how we can enhance our understanding of the student experience, as well as to how we can better support students to achieve at University. Indeed we can understand this area of academic literacy as an area of 'troublesome knowledge' (Land 2017, 180), with encounters with such knowledge potentially leading to a period of pedagogic, or educational, 'frailty' for individuals. An exploration of this issue could thus prove insightful into enhancing not only our understanding of how students develop their referencing skills but as to how students develop resilience/frailty in response to complex exclusions embedded in the discursive and cultural practices of higher education.

Literature review

The research literature has paid considerable attention to the issue of academic literacies for some time (for example Lea and Street 2006; Goodfellow 2011; Hallett 2012; Tapp 2015). However, referencing has been considered a relatively minor aspect of academic literacy practice. One exception to this absence is Hutchings' work which explores the wider significance of referencing on student identity, discussing the 'alienating features of academic culture to new students' (2014). Hutchings argues that referencing serves to 'promote a sense of non-belonging' (312-313). Similarly, Hendricks and Quinn argue that referencing is not simply an innocuous skill that students straightforwardly acquire. Instead, referencing can become an issue of power: 'when lecturers fail to make academic discourse explicit to students, [they] serve to maintain a divide between student novices and academic experts' (Hendricks and Quinn 2000, 448.) Likewise, in a more general exploration of the emotional struggles students' experience when developing academic writing, Gourlay also raises this notion of explicitness and proposes that: 'a recognition of academic literacies as threshold practices could open up a discussion of tacit practices' (Gourlay 2009, 189).

Method

Participants

This qualitative study consisted of two stages. In the initial stage, in order to identify potential interviewees, undergraduate students from a UK University in the South-East of England were asked to complete a short questionnaire about their experiences of developing referencing skills. The questionnaire focused on the affective aspects of the process of referencing skills development. Participants were chosen randomly from a cross-disciplinary sample of students who had previously visited the University's Learning Development service, based in the library. Thirteen responses were received.

Three interviewees were identified from the questionnaire for the second stage of the research process, a series of interviews. The questionnaire responses were also used to help focus the interview questions. These interviews were audio-recorded. The questions used in the interview were similar to the focus of the questionnaire, but enabled interviewees to expand upon their responses in the questionnaire with further questions on the themes raised. The interviews followed a semi-structured format.

Ethical issues

Institutional ethical approval was granted, and all participants provided informed consent for their participation. Each participant was given a pseudonym to ensure anonymity.

Sample size

This is a small-scale study. This study does not attempt to achieve saturation of data or to pursue a complete representation of events. Rather we view this research study as an illuminative instance (Holliday 2002) that can add depth to other articulations of a wider picture, or that can offer a divergent counter narrative to a broader, more generalised representation of students' experiences.

General discussion

A number of themes emerged from this research. Repeatedly the students reported feelings of anxiety and a lack of agency. This anxiety appeared to be compounded by fears regarding University procedures relating to academic misconduct. Indeed the students' responses suggested a disconnect between students' experiences and the intentions of staff to create a welcoming learning environment. As a result, students recurrently reported a desire for more scaffolding at an early stage of development. However it may not be possible to provide students with as much support as they would wish, given the expanding student numbers and demands upon staff time. Thus there is certainly further debate to be had regarding the expectations of students towards student support and how realistic, and how desirable, these may be for staff to attempt to fulfil. Of course it could be argued that the students are experiencing a necessary, emotional transition - however uncomfortable. Indeed Gourlay describes academic literacy development as 'a period of struggle as a result of inhabiting a 'betwixt space'' (Gourlay 2009, 184). Thus, it may be that students temporarily need to inhabit this 'betwixt space'. However, the research findings seem to suggest that as students experience this 'emotional destabilization' they are suffering disproportionate levels of anxiety. And rather than transitioning to a 'deeper territory of understanding', they appear to lack the 'resilience to tolerate periods of uncertainty' (Land 2017, 180). So, far from supporting the development of resilience, confusion over referencing becomes a source of pedagogic frailty (Kinchin and Winstone, 2017).

Conclusion

Potentially, establishing a greater understanding of the process of developing referencing skills as being for many a difficult and emotional one may enable higher education professionals to reconsider the way we manage the transition to deeper understanding, moving away from a conceptualisation of referencing as less worthy of attention than other areas of academic practice. Reconsidering how referencing is marked in assignments, the clarity of referencing related feedback, or the ways in which we introduce students to concepts of plagiarism could potentially alleviate anxiety and increase self-efficacy for students. Of course such solutions are problematized by the complex challenges experienced by staff today within higher education. However, by opening up a debate regarding the disconnection between students' experiences and staff support in this area it is possible to consider what further work could be done to ensure implicit writing requirements are made explicit and to mitigate student anxiety and frailty.

(Words 1082)

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