THE "ACADEMIC LITERACIES" MODEL: 
THEORY AND APPLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT: The term “academic literacies” refers to the diverse and multiple literacies found in academic contexts such as disciplinary and subject matter courses. Although originally developed with regard to the study of literacies in higher education and the university, the concept of academic literacies also applies to K-12 education. An academic literacies perspective treats reading and writing as social practices, that vary with context, culture and genre (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Street, 1984; 1995). The literacy practices of academic disciplines can be viewed as varied social practices associated with different communities. In addition, an academic literacies perspective also takes account of literacies which are not directly associated with subjects and disciplines but with broader institutional discourses and genres. An academic literacies perspective views student writing and learning as issues of epistemology and identities rather than of skill acquisition or academic socialisation alone, although the perspectives are not mutually exclusive and individuals may move between them according to context and purpose. From the student point of view a dominant feature of academic literacy practices is the requirement to switch their writing styles and genres between one setting and another, to deploy a repertoire of literacy practices appropriate to each setting, and to handle the social meanings and identities that each evokes.

KEYWORDS: literacy; genre; teaching.

1. Introduction

Building upon theories of reading, writing, and literacy as social practices (what has been called the New Literacy Studies; cf., Barton, 1994; Gee, 1996; Street, 1984, 1995), Lea & Street have argued for a new approach to understanding student writing and literacy in academic contexts which challenges the dominant “deficit” model (1998, 1999). Rather than engaging in debates about good or bad writing, they conceptualised writing in academic contexts, such as university courses, at the level of epistemology. They argued that approaches to student writing and literacy in academic contexts could be conceptualised through the use of three overlapping perspectives or models: (1) a study skills model, (2) an academic socialization model, and (3) an academic literacies model.

The first, the study skills model, sees writing and literacy as primarily an individual and cognitive skill. This approach focuses on the surface features of language form and presumes that students can transfer their knowledge of writing and literacy unproblematically from one context to another. The second, termed academic socialization, is concerned with students’ acculturation into disciplinary and subject-based discourses and genres. Students acquire the ways of talking, writing, thinking, and using literacy that typified members of a disciplinary or subject area community. The academic socialization model presumes that the disciplinary discourses and genres are relatively stable and that once students have learnt and understood the ground rules of a particular academic discourse they are able to reproduce it unproblematically. The third model, termed academic literacies; is concerned with meaning making, identity, power and authority and foregrounds the institutional nature of what

“counts” as knowledge in any particular academic context. It is similar in many ways to the academic socialization model except that it views the processes involved in acquiring appropriate and effective uses of literacy as more complex, dynamic, nuanced, situated, and involving both epistemological issues and social processes including power relations among people and institutions, and social identities. To date, both at the university level and the elementary and secondary levels it has been the skills model and the academic socialization model that has guided curriculum development and instructional practices as well as research.

The three models are not mutually exclusive, rather they overlap. All three models could be applied to any academic context, such as examining the writing and literacy practices in biology, anthropology or teacher education and how students come to understand and use those literacy practices in each academic context. There is also overlap at a theoretical level. For example, both the academic socialization model and the academic literacies model focus attention on the relationship between epistemology and acts of writing and literacy in subject areas and disciplines (cf., Bazerman, 1988; Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995). However, the academic literacies model goes further by focusing on the relationship of epistemology and writing not just in the subject area in general but also more generally, in institutional requirements (eg regarding plagiarism, feedback etc) and also in more specific contexts such as variation across individual faculty members’ requirements and even individual student assignments.

The three models are helpful both for researchers trying to better understand writing and other literacy practices in academic contexts and for educators who are developing curriculum, instructional programs, and being reflective on their own teaching practices. For example, universities often run programs that encourage participation in the university by a widening range of people with diverse backgrounds. An academic socialisation model might guide how tutors help students move from note-taking to doing overhead projector presentations, while an academic literacies model might make explicit how such tutoring procedures are framed not as “deficit” for students who are non-native speakers of English but something that all students encounter as the shift from secondary school into post-secondary education. Similarly, with regard to writing and literacy practices within a Law School, a skills model focusing on the surface features of texts might enhance preference also to an academic literacies model in order to foreground text production and the relationship between writing and epistemology; helping students understand what “counts” as Law in a course for level one students.

2. Approaches to writing and models of learning

The three models above are associated with particular conceptualisations of both language and learning theory, each having its own associated roots and traditions. The study skills model is concerned with the use of written language at the surface level and concentrates upon teaching students formal features of language, for example, sentence structure, grammar and punctuation. It pays little attention to context and is implicitly informed by autonomous and additive theories of learning, such as behaviourism, which are concerned with the transmission of knowledge. In contrast, academic socialization models recognizes that subject areas and disciplines use different genres and discourses to construct knowledge in particular ways (cf., Bazerman, 1988; Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995). The academic socialization model is associated with the growth in constructivism and situated learning as organizing frames as well as with work in the field of sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, and genre theory. The academic literacies model draws on both the skills and academic socialization models but goes further than the academic socialization model in paying particular attention to the relationships of power, authority, meaning making, and
identity that are implicit in the use of literacy practices within specific institutional settings. Importantly, it does not view literacy practices as residing entirely in disciplinary and subject based communities but examines how literacy practices from other institutions (e.g., government, business, university bureaucracy, etc.) are implicated in what students need to learn and do. Recent work on the ‘marketisation’ of Higher Education, for instance, might be called upon here (cf. Barnett and Griffin, 1997). The academic literacies model is influenced by social and critical linguistics (cf., Candlin & Hyland, 1999; Fairclough, 1992) and by recent critiques of sociocultural theory (Bloome et al., 2005, Lewis et al., forthcoming) emphasising a theory of learning which foregrounds power, identity and agency in the role of language in the learning process.

3. Using the academic literacies model as a design frame

Lillis (2003) and Lea (2004) have suggested that the academic literacies model needs to be developed as a ‘design frame’, with a focus on pedagogy. In what follows, we show how an academic literacies model can help provide a design frame for development of curriculum and instruction in two academic contexts. The first is a university program for widening participation in the university for linguistic minority students and the second is a university law program. Although the examples we use come from the university level in the United Kingdom, the principles and issues apply across academic contexts at secondary and elementary school levels and in other countries. The examples show the limitations of relying solely on study skills and academic socialisation models; and the relative value of an academic literacies model in emphasising the importance of explicitness in teachers marking for students the shifts in genre and mode as they move between group work, speaking, note taking, presentation, more formal writing, etc. In particular we identify the link between cultural practices and different genres; the importance of feedback on students’ written assignments in the learning process; and how both students and their tutors can learn much from the foregrounding of both meaning making and identity in the writing process.

4. The Academic Literacy Development Programme

One of the difficulties that many students encounter as they shift into higher education involves writing and academic discourse. Students from linguistic minority community backgrounds may experience such difficulties to a greater degree than some other students. In conjunction with government institutions concerned with ‘widening participation’ (cf. ‘Aspire’), King’s College London has instituted a programme for students from linguistic minority community backgrounds attending schools in the nearby area who would like to move on to study at university (not just at King’s College London). The Programme, called the Academic Literacy Development Programme, was intended to provide additional educational opportunities for “A” level students (pre-university students in the UK, equivalent of High School finishers in the USA) from the local area who were still in the process of learning English as an additional language. It was hoped that participation in the Programme would enhance both their ‘A’ level performance1 and their chances of entering higher education. The Programme consisted of three-hour sessions on most Saturday mornings, from January to December. The Programme was not an English language programme per se, but

1 ‘A’ level refers to students in the United Kingdom who are one or two years away from making application to a university. In order to obtain entrance to university these students need to do well in their studies and on their ‘A’-level examinations. There is no exact analogous situation in the U.S., the closest would be junior and seniors in high school taking classes that are oriented to preparing them for college and for taking college entrance tests such as the SATs, Advance Placement examinations, etc.).
rather focused on developing the use of academic English in Higher Educational contexts in the UK. Many of the students had spent limited time in the UK, and so might be unfamiliar with the academic language and literacy practices required for university courses.

As part of this programme, a team of tutors (the term used in the UK for those teaching at university level, whilst ‘teacher’ is mostly reserved for school education), including the author, conducted sessions based on some of the theoretical principles developed from the academic literacies model and with recent work on multimodality and genre (cf., Kress, 2003, Kress & Street, 2006; Van Dijk, 1997). In these sessions students were required to interact with different categories of text that we defined as different genres and modes. We define genres as types of text, both spoken and written, such as student discussions, written notes, letters, academic essays, etc. We wanted to help students be more aware of the different language and semiotic practices associated with the requirements of different genres in academic contexts.

In one of the early sessions one of the tutors gave a presentation on genre switching (see Figure 1 & Table 1). He drew attention to the fact that prior to having a discussion, just having thoughts and ideas about a subject already involves certain kinds of representation, with different language entailments than required in other forms or genres.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THOUGHTS/ IDEAS</th>
<th>Free Flowing, Not, Sentences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TALK/DISCUSSION</td>
<td>Some Explicitness, Awareness of Interlocutor's Communicative Needs, Language Mode/Speech Patterns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOTES</td>
<td>Some Structure, Headings, Lay Out, Use Of Visual As Well As Language Mode</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OVERHEAD</td>
<td>Key Terms, Single Words, Lay Out, Semiosis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WRITTEN TEXT</td>
<td>J oined Up Sentences, Coherence/Cohesion, If Academic Then Formal Conventions, Editing And Revision</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 1 – Genre/ mode switching.

Thoughts may, for instance, be free flowing, they may not always operate in sentences and they may include images and other non linguistic semiosis such as colours. Then, when the students were asked to move into group talk and discussion, they were required to provide explicitness, to take account of their interlocutor and to employ specific language features and defined speech patterns. The shift from free flowing thoughts / ideas to some explicitness in discussion with others we identified as a shift to a different genre, although as Gunther Kress has pointed out (personal communication) it also involves a shift of ‘mode’ – from internal thought to external speech). Likewise, as the students shifted from talk and discussion to taking notes, new requirements came into play, such as the need for explicit attention to language structure, use of headings, and use of visual as well as language “modes” such as lay out, etc. The tutors encouraged students to make presentations to the whole class using overhead projector slides and again drew attention to the particular genre
and mode features of an overhead slide, such as highlighting of key terms, use of single words and layout. Finally, students were asked to provide a page of written text based upon the discussions and overheads and these required joined up sentences; attention to coherence and cohesion, use of formal conventions of academic writing and attention to editing and revision. Each genre and mode had different qualities. In their educational histories, students had not always been made explicitly aware of these qualities associated with different genres as they moved between different genres in their school work. They had rarely been given time to dwell on and develop the distinctive features of each genre, or to address the question of the relationship of these different genres to each other, including the fluid overlap of the boundaries of each genre. In the Programme, teachers asked, for instance, how do genres and modes vary across disciplines, subjects and fields? Students from science disciplines appeared less familiar with extended prose but adept at structured layout and use of visual signs, whilst social science students had had more written work to do in their school practice but had not necessarily differentiated its features from those of talk and visual layout as explicitly as we were doing in these sessions. In some cases the students reported that the teachers in their regular school would follow a discussion by asking them to “write it up” without necessarily making explicit the different requirements as they switched genre from speech to writing or from notes to essays. In the Academic Literacy Development Programme, explicit attention was focused on such switching, transformation and the changing of meanings and representations from one genre and mode to another and discussed how this often involves a different ‘mix’ of two or more genres and modes, such as the notion that writing always creates meaning through layout as well as through the use of words. Attention to these issues constituted a basic premise of the pedagogy in the course.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>How do genres / modes vary across disciplines / subjects / fields?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Genre</td>
<td>Type of text; for example, formal / informal, notes, letters, academic essay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genre mode</td>
<td>A regularized, organized set of resources for meaning-making; for example, image, gaze, gesture, movement, speech, writing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline</td>
<td>Field of study, academic subject; for example, geography. Chemistry, business studies, area studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switching / Transformation</td>
<td>Changing meanings and representations from one mode (e.g., speech) into another mode (e.g., writing), often involving a different mix of both modes (e.g., writing and layout).</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 - Key Question and Definitions in Widening Participation Programme Sessions on Genre / Mode Shifting.

As we focused on the different genres that participants used within and across different activity frames, the issue of mode of representation also needed to be addressed. Since the activities differed in terms of type of content represented, and genres used, a linguistic analysis of the texts produced was not sufficient to convey the range of semiotic resources used by participants. Multi-semiotic theories of communication emphasise the need to look at all forms of communication in terms of their representation across different modes: linguistic, actional and visual, that are differently organised and established meaning-making resources (cf., Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1976; 2001). A multi-modal analysis enabled the teachers to depict and analyse the range of meanings expressed in the different activities and the genres associated with them. It also allowed them to theorise the multimodal nature of
literacy, and thus of different genres, that students needed to master in order to represent different types of curriculum content for different purposes, and therefore to participate in different activities. For instance, when students presented their own overhead projector slides of their discussions, we helped them to see the importance not simply of subject content – such as the themes necessary for filling in the statement about their personal background and interests that is required in the University application form – but also of layout, how they ordered the data using font, capitals, arrows, etc.

The team members who taught on the Programme also engaged in ethnographic-style research. They were interested in the relationship between the programme objectives and actual experiences and perceptions of the sessions by the students and the tutors. As one of the tutors who both taught the course and engaged in research with it, noted:

The ALD programme tries to challenge some of the expectations students may have met at school… about language as narrowly defined… the course involves issues of discourse, genre, writing as social process… within a notion of building on what they already had and bring to the programme rather than treating them as a deficit and just fixing that

As Street and Scalone (forthcoming) noted in their analysis of the Academic Literacy Development Programme, by expressing personal styles and learning strategies during classroom activities and engaging with their related genres, students participated both in the community of the academy and in the community formed by the students during the course. Furthermore, by engaging with the types of literacy required in higher education in the U.K., they collaboratively constructed an understanding of official requirements and participated in learning-oriented activities. Interaction with other students and with tutors was therefore fundamental in making explicit the different types of knowledge that students already used and that they needed to develop and customise to fit Higher Education standards. Linking these findings with the three models proposed by Lea and Street, the report by Street and Scalone concludes:

Treating such students as collaborators in the development of the academic literacies necessary for engagement with HE in the UK, can perhaps offer a different and more supportive route to ‘Widening Participation’ than the more traditional focus on either study skills or academic socialisation

5. Open University Law Faculty: writing level one course materials

The second example of using an Academic Literacies Model as a Design Frame involves a very different group of teachers and students; university Law faculty and law students. In this example, we focus on the issues of meaning making and identity in academic writing.

The Open University provides courses for more than 200,000 students worldwide studying at a distance, both online and with more traditional print based courses. The method of study is described as supported learning, in that all students are placed in either online or face to face tutorial groups and, therefore have good access to support from an academic tutor. Nevertheless, specially written course materials constitute the major part of the teaching context. The courses are designed by the university’s central faculty who – as is the case with more conventional universities - are appointed on the basis of their expertise and research standing in a particular academic field, in this instance in Law. In common with other higher education institutions, the Open University is at present responding to increased student demand for courses in vocational and professional areas. For some years the university has been offering higher level courses for students who wish to gain a law degree. Recently,
however, the faculty decided to extend their course offerings and provide introductory, undergraduate, level one, study in Law, which would introduce students to:

the nature and function of rules and law, to the distinctiveness of legal reasoning, and to the way in which law both responds to social phenomena and contributes to the development of different social, business and economic institutions (Open University website at: http://www3.open.ac.uk/courses/bin/p12.dll?C01W100_9_63)

In recognition of the specific demands being made on academics, who were more familiar with more conventional, higher level university Law study, faculty who were designing this course and its materials were offered two professional development workshops in order to explore the nature of writing level one course materials. These workshops were based on principles from the academic literacies model, foregrounding the relationship between, mode, genre, literacies and identities. However, unlike the students in the King’s College Academic Literacy Development Programme, faculty participating in the workshops were not introduced explicitly to any of the underlying principles that provided the theoretical perspective which underpinned the tasks and activities. Rather, faculty were offered the opportunity to consider the implications of being an academic writer in relation to the very specific mode of written course materials, with a particular but implicit focus upon issues of meaning making and identity in this context. Participants were introduced to the nature of writing as more than a technical skill (again with no explicit mention of the theoretical work on writing as social practice). In order to foreground the nature of both meaning making and identity in the writing process, the first workshop concentrated on the student perspective, exploring the nature of different written genres in samples of distance learning materials. It also examined the written genres which constituted the discipline of Law and the implications of student writer identity (cf., Ivanic, 1998) but in this instance in relation to the reading process in relation to students reading of distance learning materials. The underlying principles of an academic literacies model were implicitly introduced through participant engagement in the activities themselves.

The first workshop provided faculty with the opportunity to explore the main challenges in making distance course materials successful through a lens which concentrated on meaning making and identity and examined how writing for students from a diverse audience contrasted with other kinds of academic writing, with which participants were more familiar. In exploring these issues the Law faculty participants considered what kinds of difficulties they envisaged students might have reading and working with the course materials and what potential problems might arise between students’ everyday knowledge about law and studying Law as an academic subject. Faculty members were asked to construct imaginary case studies of students who might take such a course, concentrating on issues such as prior experience, both of study and of Law - in lay, professional and academic contexts - and students’ expectations of studying at a distance. In working together on these activities, participants, who had no particular academic interest in language or literacies, began to identify – tacitly - the diverse literacy practices which were involved in the meaning making process, including practices of potential students who would bring their own identities and understandings to their reading of the course materials. These issues were explored without explicitly introducing faculty to the particular language of description provided by literacies research, concerning the constraints and opportunities of mode and their implications in relation to literacy practices.

The second workshop followed some weeks after the first, giving participants the opportunity to reflect upon the implications of the workshop activities for their own practice. Although language is clearly foregrounded in the study of Law, participants reported that they had not previously considered the complexity of writing course texts and that the first
workshop had made them think much more about the issues involved in writing for a potentially very diverse audience. Their main focus, prior to the workshops had been upon the content matter of this particular course, one which somewhat broke with tradition of what ‘counts’ as undergraduate law study. What is interesting to us as academic literacies researchers is that faculty were able to engage with the notion of writing as social and contextual practice without our explicitly introducing the research or its conceptual framing, on which the workshops had been based. Although faculty recognised that the course materials needed to be written in such a way that they addressed diverse audiences they were also concerned that an attempt to simplify and explicate fully might lead to a dilution of legal concepts, or even inaccuracies in the course material thus indicating some tension between an academic socialization and an academic literacies perspective.

The second workshop had a rather different focus, away from the student and towards faculty themselves as writers. One of the underlying assumptions of an academic literacies model is that educators need to be concerned with literacies more generally across academic contexts and not only the assessed texts produced by students (Lea & Street, 1999) (such as the papers they submit for grades or the examinations students take). By focusing on the writing practices of the academics themselves, the sessions drew on this broader notion of academic literacies, recognizing the variety in institutional practices that are involved in academics’ own writing. Starting with the notion of academics as writers, participants were given the opportunity to examine their own literacy practices and the implications these might have for their writing identities as course materials writers. As in the previous workshop - where the focus had been on identity and meaning making for the student reader - the conceptual framing was left implicit. Faculty were asked to list the kinds of writing that they undertook as part of their role as an academic (see Figure 2). This produced a list of very diverse texts. However, in discussions around the nature of their writing an interesting distinction emerged between public and private writing, which participants regarded as particularly significant for them as writers in both professional and academic domains. As with the students they were bringing their own experiences of meaning making and identity to their writing of this particular Law course, thus foregrounding the relationship between writing and issues of epistemology, which is a dominant framing in the literacies research field.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic papers (public)</th>
<th>MA website materials (public)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Briefs for counsel/skeleton arguments for court (public)</td>
<td>Assignment questions (semi-public)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual reports (public)</td>
<td>Course descriptions (semi-public)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syllabus (public)</td>
<td>Feedback on assignments (private)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own postgraduate writing (MA, PhD)</td>
<td>Research proposals (public)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal articles (public)</td>
<td>Minutes (semi-public)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Letters to students (private)</td>
<td>Notes (private)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Planning tutorial (private)</td>
<td>OU papers (semi-public)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Lecture notes (private)</td>
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</tbody>
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Fig. 2 - Law Faculty Experience Of Other Academic/Professional Writing.
The workshops provided the opportunity to operationalise in an institutional context the principles of the academic literacies model (Lea & Street, 1998). In this instance pedagogic practice is associated with the specific mode of distance learning course materials. With their focus on identity, meaning making, student diversity, writing for different audiences and faculty academic writing, these two workshops enabled faculty to engage with some of the key concepts from the academic literacies model, despite the fact that they were not familiar with this language of description, nor were they introduced to it explicitly in the sessions. The sessions were presented as very practica’ in nature and designed to address faculty concerns about writing this specific Law course, enabling them to reflect upon their own writing and the ways in which the subject of Law is constructed in academic (as opposed to legal) contexts through particular and contextualized writing practices, thus foregrounding the relationship between writing and epistemological imperatives. It also provided them with the tools to consider the ways in which course texts are mediated by both student and academic identities and how meanings are negotiated through engagement in written and multi-modal texts in specific and localised contexts.

6. Summary

With regard to writing and other literacy practices in educational contexts, three models have been proposed to guide educators: a skills model, an academic socialization model, and an academic literacies model. Using experiences in two very different academic programs, we have shown how an academic literacies model can be used to frame curricular and instructional design. Rather than focusing on student deficits, an approach using the academic literacies model foregrounds the variety and specificity of institutional practices, and students’ struggles to make sense of these. In the two academic contexts described in this article, the instructional leaders (the tutors) worked closely with the participants (the students in the Academic Literacy Development Programme and the Law faculty in the Open University workshops) to collaboratively investigate the range of genres, modes, shifts, transformations, representations, meaning making processes, and identities, involved in academic learning within and across academic contexts. Such understandings, when made explicit, provide greater opportunities for teaching and learning as well as for examining how such literacy practices are related to epistemological issues.

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