

Reflecting on Writing Support through the Academic Literacies Model

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ABSTRACT

The great institutional variety of writing support in the UK is reflected in the many, sometimes tacit, sometimes explicit, conceptual approaches to it. In such a context, critical reflection is more important than ever for practitioners, and the current article explores how writing lecturers can use a theoretical model, in this case Lea and Street's academic literacies approach. After introducing academic literacies and the objectives for writing support this model entails, the article analyses the results of a survey among university students who received one-to-one writing support in order to identify whether the support they received achieved the aims of the academic literacies approach. In addition to a reflection on the efficiency of writing support practice, the article also offers a contribution to the discussion of the academic literacies model by focussing on the impact this approach can have on student writers.

Introduction

In contrast to the US, where writing centres have a long tradition, writing support was not developed on a wider scale before the 1990s at UK universities (Ganobcsik-Williams, 2006, xxi). This relatively recent expansion means that it is a field characterised by great institutional variety: support structures range from central support units to support within departments, from facilities for specific student groups to those for all students. These structures and their names are also subject to regular changes. In Glasgow, for example, all three main universities offer academic and writing support through different departments or services, two of which underwent major restructuring within the last three years: at Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU), where I am based, the former Effective Learning Service (ELS) that provided writing and academic learning support to all students across the university was disbanded and staff now work alongside ICT and general student support in Learning Development Centres in each of the three schools. GCU remains the only university in Glasgow where writing support for second language speakers is not provided by a special ELT unit. At Strathclyde University, the former Centre for Academic Practice and Learning Enhancement was closed, and writing support is now provided under the name "Study Skills @ Strathclyde". Only the Student Learning Service at the University of Glasgow has maintained its name, despite some internal changes.

The variety of institutional structures is reinforced by the different background of the lecturers and tutors of academic writing, which ranges from adult education and FE to research in education, from teaching English as a foreign language to research in English literature and linguistics, from teaching at schools to working with dyslexic students. These different areas of expertise thus also contribute to the great diversity in approaches and practice in this field.

For writing lecturers in the UK this situation brings both benefits and challenges. The lack of historically grown and generally unchallenged standards gives us greater freedom to

explore different practices. At the same time, however, it can be challenging to root our individual work in a shared understanding of the pedagogical aims we are pursuing. The research into academic writing that has emerged since the late 1990s is a useful point of reference in terms of our conceptual understanding of the area, but on-going reflection on our practice is essential in order to guide our everyday practice in such an environment.

This article presents the academic literacies model as a conceptual framework for reflection on writing support. For this purpose, I briefly introduce the academic literacies model as the basis of my colleagues' and my work in writing support in the former Effective Learning Service at Glasgow Caledonian University. In the following, I will present a survey of students who used this service, which was conducted as part of on-going action research into our provision of writing support. My analysis evaluates to what degree our work has achieved or failed to achieve the pedagogical aims stipulated by the academic literacies model. As such, the article presents a personal reflection into the relationship between theory and practice in my own teaching. At the same time, the article can contribute to the growing body of literature on academic literacies, as, to date, there is relatively little research on students' experience of the impact of this model.

The academic literacies model

Over the last 20 years, an increasing body of research into academic writing has conceptualised the often tacit theories behind the diverse practice in this field, providing the basis for a more systematic approach to academic and writing support. These approaches reject the idea of generic study skills or writing skills related to surface features of language, such as correct spelling or punctuation. Instead, they acknowledge the complexity of learning and writing practices and critically examine the influence of "academic norms and conventions as well as institutional policy, particularly in relation to issues of identity and power" (Coffin and Donohue, 2012, 65).

Among these new models, Lea and Street's concept of academic literacies (Lea, 1999; Lea and Street, 2006) has been particularly prevalent in the UK. Their conceptualisation of academic writing as a social practice encapsulates aspects of two alternative models they identified in academic settings: the first is a study skills approach that views writing as a cognitive skill independent of any subject-specific knowledge. Lea and Street regard this view as too superficial, but emphasise that the mechanics of language, such as correct sentence structure or punctuation, still play an important role in communication. Similarly, they reject the idea that participation in a specific academic community alone will enable students to become familiar with the conventions of the discourses and genres used in it (the academic socialisation model), but retain an awareness of the diversity of discursive practices in academia (see Lea and Street, 1998). These two aspects, familiarity with the mechanics of language and with the conventions used in discipline-specific genres, they argue, are insufficient to understand the complex relationship between meaning making in academic texts and the different ways of constructing the world and social identities that underlie this process. If the goal is to develop students' "self-authorship" (Kreber, 2010, 173) writers need to develop a fuller understanding of language as the expression of social

identities and values. Their suggested approach, academic literacies, therefore proposes a more holistic writing pedagogy that encompasses all of these aspects.

Lea and Street's model has reinvigorated discussion of academic writing practices in the UK. A considerable number of publications describe pedagogical interventions and cite Lea and Street's work as one of their sources of inspiration, while others continue the theoretical reflection on the concept. Lea (2004) and Lillis (2001) have also used it to formulate recommendations for teaching practice, whether in the form of principles for curriculum design or forms of dialogues in work with individual students respectively.

Academic Literacies Practice in ELS

These publications and suggestions for practice played an important part in the development of the Effective Learning Service at GCU. Although the ELS was initially funded by Widening Access funds from the Scottish Government, it soon became apparent that the discrepancy between the practices HE demanded and the lack of teaching activities that helped students master these practices (Lillis, 1997, 187) posed a challenge to many students across the spectrum. In response to this need, ELS support was provided university wide (Figg, McAllister and Shapiro, 2006). The unit's commitment to widening access could easily be associated with a traditional study skills approach that provided 'problematic' students with 'remedial opportunities' to help them integrate into the mainstream system. Paradoxically perhaps, this focus also meant that staff in the ELS were sensitive to the way in which academic literacy practice "construct and constitute knowledge in [...] ways which frequently conflict with adult students' other experiences of constructing their own world knowledge" (Lea, 1999, 105). As a result, ELS staff welcomed the emancipatory power of an academic literacies approach and, gradually, teaching practice changed into an approach designed to reflect the basic tenets of the academic literacy model: to make students "aware of the specific expectations of the academic reader within their discipline" (Bharuthram and McKenna, 2006, 497).

In practice this meant a shift from mainly generic workshops and the provision of materials across the university to a greater emphasis on tailored workshops, delivered in close collaboration with subject lecturers. In these workshops, staff use example texts from the students' discipline to follow Lillis' (2001) suggestion to make language visible and to expose the values and assumptions behind the text, thus helping students to explore the genres of their field. Although the opportunities of establishing individual dialogues about students' own written communication are limited in workshops, ELS lecturers often use individual or group tasks to engage students in practical exploration of the conventions and values underlying the example texts analysed.

In addition, individual appointments offer students the possibility to explore the conventions of academic writing by discussing specific assignments. Through formative feedback on areas in which students divert from the meaning making practices of a specific genre, writing lecturers in ELS encourage students to adopt a style that resembles dominant practice in their field more closely or to "talk back" (Lillis, 2001, 158) and directly challenge the conventions.

All of these learning and teaching activities underline the complexity of meaning making in the writing process and make the social roles, genre conventions and contextual factors that

underlie language visible. By making these aspects explicit, staff at the ELS aim at helping students compare their own writing to that of others and find their own academic voice. When I joined the Effective Learning Service in 2007, this practice was firmly established and all writing lecturers working in the team were committed to fulfilling Lillis' demand for a pedagogy that allows students to "participate in existing dominant practices in higher education, such as essayist writing, whilst allowing space for challenging conventions in a changing higher education context which is premised upon notions of diversity and inclusion" (Lillis, 2006, 33).

Gathering Evidence for Reflection

With a background in linguistics and research into theatre and literature, my own role as a lecturer in ELS initially echoed these aims of Lillis' pedagogy – I simultaneously adopted ELS practice and explored the scholarly work underlying it. Comparing my own practice to relevant research has thus been an important aspect of professional reflection from the beginning. Another important question on-going reflection needs to address, however, is whether one's practice achieves the aims and ideas adopted. As a writing lecturer committed to a pedagogy influenced by literature on academic writing, I need to critically reflect whether our work in ELS fulfils the three demands formulated by Lillis, i.e. whether it helps to 1) make explicit tacit conventions of academic writing, and thereby 2) enables students to participate successfully in their subjects' dominant writing practices or 3) to productively challenge them.

These aims are sufficiently complex to defy easy, straightforward outcome measures, such as progression and retention figures. Instead the impact of our pedagogy should be reflected in a range of different aspects, such as the quality and development of students' work, but above all in their own experience. Feedback from students who used the ELS regularly provided some anecdotal evidence, and a pilot study (McAllister, 2008) suggested that participants in tailored workshops felt that clarification of tacit knowledge was valuable to their writing experience. In 2011 the annual ELS survey, which was reviewed by the University's ethics committee, was opened up to students who had received feedback during the last three academic years. This larger cohort offered the chance to receive further evidence of students' perception of ELS's work for this reflection

It would have been theoretically possible to formulate questions which explicitly mentioned the three objectives named above. Nonetheless, the survey used an open question that asked them to elaborate on "the importance of ELS to [their] experience as a student," a choice that was partly made for practical reasons, as it meant only a minor reformulation from previous surveys and suited the length and style of the questionnaire better. Another reason was, however, the fact that such an open question avoided priming the participants by stating openly which effects the ELS wanted to achieve. It thus allowed an exploration of students' more spontaneous evaluation of the impact ELS support had on their development as academic writers.

The link to the anonymous online survey was sent to all students who attended one-to-one sessions with an ELS lecturer over three academic years (2008 – 2011). Some of the students who were contacted had graduated from the university at the time of the survey, so

even though the email was sent to 1629 students, delivery failure messages indicated that a significant number of email accounts were no longer active. Of the remainder, 341 students filled in the questionnaire, and 285 of them answered the question described above, on which this article is based. In line with the exploratory nature of the enquiry and the desire to include the quality of the impact the support has made on the students' understanding of academic writing, the responses were analysed with the following codes derived from Lillis' aims cited above:

- 1) ELS helped them explore academic conventions in their relevant disciplines, making language and expectations visible
- 2) ELS helped them adapt to these expectations
- 3) ELS gave them space to challenge and question these conventions

The following sections present an analysis of students' perception of the impact ELS support organised around these three aims. The analysis is followed by a discussion in how far these results can shape our critical reflection as writing lecturers.

Making tacit knowledge explicit

The act of making tacit knowledge explicit is explicitly mentioned in seventy-three responses. Some students emphasised the process of "clarifying issues [she] had with the coursework" (Q 66)¹ or the conversations that "help[ed her] make sense of academic language" and assignments (Q 262). The majority, however, focused on the outcome of this process, "a better understanding of what [she] was doing," of "what was expected in the assessments," "how to write academically" and of "the structure and concepts of doing research" (Qs 67, 224, 235 and 142). It is particularly interesting to note in this context that in most answers, the word "understand" is accompanied by a qualifier: a "better understanding," "enhanced my understanding," "helped me further understand" or "understand more clearly" (Qs 224, 67, 121, 142 and 152). This suggests that students recognise their own agency in the process of understanding, but perceive the writing lecturers' efforts to make expectations and conventions of academic writing explicit as a factor that can enable them to progress further in their decoding of such implicit knowledge.

Students cite different reasons why such clarification is valuable, but one that features most prominently among their answers is the novelty of the format: for many the academic writing required by their courses is "different to any other sort of writing [they] have had to do" (Q 149), sometimes because their previous experience stems from a different education system (Qs 88, 162, 186) or because they have entered a higher level of academic study in the UK (Qs 86, 239). Decoding the expectations of such a new format is perceived as an even greater challenge in the context of a HE system in which "there exists a huge gap between what is expected and what is actually taught" (Q 23; the idea is echoed in Q 38). In addition to a lack of explanation, students also perceived those they were given by some of their subject lecturers as too complex and valued the opportunity to "break it down into

¹ In the following analysis, she is used as the generic pronoun for respondents to the anonymous survey. Responses are referenced by numbers given to the questionnaire according to the order in which they were returned, e.g. Q 66 refers to the 66th questionnaire received.

manageable chunks” (Q 151; for similar comments see Qs 28, 81, 97, 227, 265). Interestingly ELS staff were perceived to be in a position to offer such explanation because of their expertise in writing and research matters, but at the same time because of their neutrality that allowed them to compare practices in different departments (Qs 135, 39).

Addressing the lack of explicit teaching of conventions related to language and writing that “continue to be viewed as appropriate and unproblematic ‘common sense’” (Lillis, 1997, 187) is a key element of an academic literacies approach, and it is positive to observe that students clearly perceive this as an important aspect of the work of ELS. One minor caveat might be that in some instances the need for making tacit knowledge explicit could be at odds with the emancipatory aims of the same model. Some students comment on their appreciation of clear explanation in terms that suggest less initiative than these aims would require: it “has been very useful in going over course work, *telling me* what is expected of me at this level” (Q 25, italics UC) or suggesting that ELS clarified “what is needed for university level work,” but that they “need someone to read my work before it is submitted” in order to achieve this level (Q 84). The model acknowledges the need to make language visible and to help student writers participate successfully in academic literacy practices. Indeed, this is part of what Lillis terms “a long conversation (Lillis, 2001, 158) aimed at developing the writer’s own voice through adapting but also challenging these practices. Statements such as those cited above, could, however, be regarded as evidence that only the beginnings of this conversation have been established with students.

As practitioners, we therefore need to question whether we are always successful in continuing this dialogue in order to enable students to become more independent in their exploration of academic writing practices. If we as writing lecturers do not always achieve this, as the answers above suggest, we need to review whether we need to communicate this aim more clearly to our students, or whether we need to change our practice. A possible solution could consist in using a more formal structure for sessions, in which we focus on one or two aspects of students’ writing, record these as formal aims for a session and ask students to continue work on this aspect on further parts of the text. This could be further supported by clearer limitations on the length of text we review before the student has made any changes herself. Such an approach would sacrifice some of the flexibility to respond flexibly to the needs of individual students, so implementation would have to be carefully monitored to balance advantages and disadvantages. They could, however, be helpful in ensuring that students successfully move from a better understanding of conventions to improved production of academic texts.

Participating in academic literacy practices

The words students choose to relate to support that enables them to participate in essayist literacy practices is of interest. Firstly, they often refer to specific aspects of successful academic writing, such as structuring (mentioned by 48 respondents), writing in formal, academic language (24 respondents) or developing their critical thinking (6 respondents). This suggests that these respondents have learned to adopt a more analytical view of academic writing that allows them to identify weaknesses in specific areas, rather than an overall need for support.

Referring to the help they received from ELS very few respondents used the generic word support. Several others choose words such as “tips” (Qs 106, 148, 137, 113) or advice (Q 9) that indicate very practical advice. Another generic term often used is “guidance” (7 respondents). These words do not clearly indicate the degree to which students felt they were active interpreters of advice and guidance or rather passive recipient. The relationship between these two possible elements becomes clearer, however, in the expressions used by a similar number of respondents who described the process as being pointed “in the right direction” (Qs 5, 8, 81, 154, 161) or helped “back on the path” (Q 209). This expression suggests a process that is influenced by work with ELS, but depends on students’ own initiative to continue their progress. An understanding of their own agency is also visible in the 11 answers that expressed appreciation for the opportunity to receive confirmation that students were “aiming in the right direction or [whether they were] going off on a tangent” (Q 117). Such confirmation of their own understanding, as well as corrections of potential misinterpretations with regard to essayist literacy practices (5 responses), suggest that these students accept the invitation to a dialogue over academic writing with ELS lecturers.

For many, the possibility to lead this dialogue in the context of their own texts, i.e. not in an abstract form, but with regard to their own interpretation of HE literacy practices, makes working with an ELS lecturer “invaluable,” both with regard to the assignment they work on, as well as later ones (Q 93; see also Qs 115, 126, 138, 146). Finally, a close analysis of the way students use the word “help” lends further support to this interpretation: most commonly, “help” is used as a verb, followed by other words, such as “develop” (Qs 180, 10), “improve” (Qs 16, 21, 62, 72), “find” (Q 209) or “understand” (Qs 101, 116, 138, 11). Although other respondents also said ELS helped them *with* something, the frequent combination of the term with another verb, confirms the impression that students recognise the importance of their own agency. These answers thus assuage some of the concerns raised at the end of the previous section: a considerable number of the students who worked with ELS regard this support as a way of becoming more confident and able participants in academic discourses themselves, as opposed to the idea that someone else’s help makes their essays more successful in terms of marks. Rather than contemplating a general change in practice, as suggested above, these results indicate that we should, perhaps, explore mechanisms that can help us identify students who fail to take ownership of the writing process and who understand academic writing support merely as a way of boosting their performance. To make such evaluations unobtrusive, they could consist in something as simple as a checklist of a few questions writing lecturers use to evaluate a students’ attitude or a short question asking students’ about their confidence to continue working independently. This would then allow us to restrict measures designed to foster more independent work on their texts to the students for whom it is relevant, maintaining greater flexibility in our work with those who are already developing their own voice as writers.

Challenging conventions

The third aspect of the academic literacies model, the opportunity to actively challenge and question predominant conventions is poorly reflected in the responses. One student reports that “ELS helped [him or her] to find [his / her] academic voice (Q 153) and for another one, ELS input mainly seems to facilitate reflection on his or her own progress in writing

(Q 196), but such explicit statements are rare. Implicit evidence that students see at least the potential to challenge rather than conform to norms is provided by responses that underline the importance of support that does “not patronise or make [someone] feel daft” (Q 28) and takes “time to listen” (Q 83). In contrast to the strong reflection of writing lecturers’ efforts to provide academic literacies support that makes tacit knowledge explicit and enables students to apply these insights to their own practices, the most outspokenly emancipatory goal of the academic literacies approach does not seem to be clearly recognised by the students who participated in this survey.

This slightly discouraging result makes this aspect the most important one for critical reflection – what are the reasons for our apparent failure to achieve this aim of the pedagogy we adopted? The most straightforward reason might be that this aspect is not given its due importance in the teaching practice of ELS lecturers. Such an inadequate translation of theory into practice could be the result of individual choices, which reflect a lack of appreciation or understanding of this aspect, or of restrictions imposed by the context in which student support takes place. Neither of these explanations can be categorically ruled out. Team discussions and insight into other team members’ teaching practice suggest a high level of awareness of the emancipatory aims of the academic literacies model. Nonetheless the degree to which this awareness shapes work with individual students can vary depending on a number of different aspects, such as the students’ level of study, differences in their individual interests which range from a genuine desire to understand literacy practices to the wish of fixing immediate problems through proof-reading or students’ current ability to analyse discourses. Furthermore, the fact that individual sessions are not guided by a specific curriculum can restrict the writing lecturers’ possibilities to create opportunities for students to challenge conventions if students want to steer the discussion into another direction.

Similarly, the department’s role within the wider context of the university can reduce writing lecturers’ ability to successfully embed this aspect in their practice. Although our role as impartial and independent advisors allows us to offer students a safe place to challenge conventions, they often prefer to “play it safe” when they submit written work to markers. Unless a culture of open critical examination of the conventions of academic writing exists in their departments as well, we might ill advise students to challenge them too vociferously. As outsiders to specific disciplines, we could also be regarded as not qualified to do so. Although I would contest this, arguing that an external thorough analysis of a discourse can provide a good basis for its critical review, it cannot be denied that such a change cannot be imposed from the outside. In the same way, students may feel that power structures within the discipline do not enable them to do this either.

This suggests that perhaps the most pertinent question is not why ELS has not achieved this aim, but whether it is in every student’s interest to do so. In other words, we need to reflect not just on our practice, but our pedagogical framework. In this context it is worth considering why the opportunity to question dominant academic conventions is an essential aspect of the academic literacies model. As a consequence of widening access to HE, students from diverse backgrounds are more likely to have acquired “Primary Discourses” (Gee, 2008, 157) that differ greatly from those valued in academia to a great degree, and authors such as Lillis (1997) and Ivanič (1998) have demonstrated the conflicts of values and identities this can cause. Offering students, especially non-traditional students, a space

where they can question and challenge conventions of discourse that can be alienating to them is thus important to help them negotiate their own position between dominant HE discourses and those they are accustomed to. Indeed some of the answers from the survey cited above indicate that students valued the sense that their opinions were respected and they were not judged by ELS lecturers.

At the same time, 45 students explicitly stated that their work with ELS greatly increased their confidence in their academic writing or helped them develop a more positive attitude towards their work. These answers do not suggest that students felt that developing the ability to participate in dominant academic writing practices posed a great threat to their identity. Since the 45 students who spontaneously reported improved confidence in their writing represent only a small percentage of all the students who used ELS, these answers do not contradict the observation that conflicts of values and identities can arise. Nevertheless, it could suggest that a considerable number of students can develop the ability to participate in the conventions of academic writing either without suffering from severe identity conflicts or is able to solve them. For some the ability to use another discourse and participate in another discourse community could also be a source of positive images of themselves. A positive attitude towards multi-discursivity is, perhaps, comparable to the experience of many bilingual individuals who do not perceive either culture and language as a threat to the other, but enjoy the richness of experience that access to two languages and their cultures offers them (see additive bilingualism, de Groot, 2010, 5). As a second language writer and speaker of English myself, I have often used this analogy in my teaching, but these results suggest that further research into this aspect of bilingualism could lead to insights that could benefit my, and others', practice in providing academic writing support.

Conclusion

More importantly the survey's results suggest that we need to explore our students' perception of academic discourse and its potential to threaten or enrich their sense of identity. This could be achieved through research into the development of students' attitudes towards academic discourses and the complex way in which these can be shaped or changed by a pedagogy based on the academic literacies model. A further study could compare students' perception of potential conflicts between the discourses with which they are familiar and those dominant in HE before and following support interventions. Linking this comparison to information on whether students felt the support demystified conventions and helped them use them successfully could also clarify whether improved understanding can reduce the risk of conflict. This research could thus not only provide further evidence to guide our practice, but also further the academic discussion of an academic literacies model and its application to writing support practice. The investigation into the effectiveness of our interventions has thus raised questions beyond its original scope, encouraging us to reflect on the conceptual basis of our work as well.

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