

Textographies and the researching and teaching of writing¹

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Abstract

This paper describes three different examples of the use of textographies in the researching and teaching of writing. The first is an examination of the exegeses that art and design students write in their masters degrees. In the second example, a group of teachers looked at the writing section of Chinese College English tests. The third example describes a course in which second language students carry out an analysis of the kinds of writing that is required of them in their academic studies. Each of the projects aims to go “beyond the text” (Freedman, 1999) in order to gain an understanding of why the texts are written as they are.

Keywords: academic writing, genre, ethnographies, textography, research-led teaching.

Resumen

Textografías e investigación y docencia de la producción escrita

En el presente artículo se describen tres ejemplos distintos sobre el uso de textografías en la investigación y enseñanza de la destreza de la producción escrita. El primer ejemplo consiste en un examen de las exégesis redactadas por los alumnos de las carreras de arte y diseño para la obtención de sus títulos de máster. En el segundo ejemplo un grupo de profesores examinan la sección correspondiente a la destreza de la producción escrita que figura en las pruebas obligatorias de inglés que se celebran en los centros superiores de China. En el tercer ejemplo se describe un curso en el que los alumnos de segundas lenguas analizan los distintos tipos de producción escrita que se les exige a lo largo de sus estudios académicos. La finalidad de cada uno de estos proyectos radica en ir “más allá del texto” (Freedman, 1999) con objeto de llegar a comprender por qué los textos se escriben del modo en el que se escriben.

Palabras clave: escritura académica, género, etnografías, textografía, docencia basada en investigación.

Introduction

This article discusses the use of textographies in the researching and teaching of writing. A textography is an approach to genre analysis which combines elements of text analysis with elements of ethnography in order to examine what texts are like, and why. Three examples of textographies are discussed. The first is a study which examined the exegeses that art and design students write in their masters degrees. The second is a study that examined the writing section of Chinese College English tests. The third is a writing course for second language graduate students learning to write in academic settings. In each of these examples the analysis moves “beyond the text” (Freedman, 1989) in order to explore the context in which the texts are produced as well as reasons for the choices that students make in their writing. In the first example the researcher looks at the students’ writing and tries to gain an insider’s understanding of why the texts are written as they are. In the second example the researchers are teachers who are wanting to uncover what students “need to know” in order to do well in their College English exams. In the third example, the students are the researchers, trying to understand in what way the context in which they are writing impacts on what they write, and why. Each of these examples aims to explore not just the particular nature and character of the texts, but also the values that underlie the texts, and the role the texts play in the particular academic setting (Johns, 1997).

What is a textography?

A textography is an approach to genre analysis which combines elements of text analysis with ethnographic techniques such as interviews, observations, and document analysis. It is, thus, something more than a traditional piece of discourse analysis, while at the same time less than a full-blown ethnography (Swales, 1998a; Swales & Luebs, 1995). A textography aims to get an inside view of the worlds in which the texts are written, why the texts are written as they are, what guides the writing, and the values that underlie the texts that have been written (Katz, 1999). A particular goal of a textography is to

examine the “contextualization” and the “situatedness” of written texts (Swales, 1998a). It aims to do this through an exploration of the texts’ “contextually embedded discursive practices” (Swales, 1998a: 112). A textography, thus, aims to provide a “thick description” (Geertz, 2007) of the context in which a text is produced in order to gain an understanding of why the text is written as it is. In doing this, textographies make an important link “between studies of language and studies of culture” (Davies, 2000: 589).

In his book *Other Floors, Other Voices*, Swales (1998b) carried out a textography of the kinds of writing that people who worked on three different floors of his building at the University of Michigan were engaged in and the kinds of texts that they wrote. He looked at their texts as well as gathered other data to help build up a picture of the site he was examining. Together with his research assistants he put together a collection of 80 slides which aimed to give a pictorial sense of the building, the ambience on each floor, the layout of the offices and typical group activities on each of the floors. University documents were examined as were old newsletters held in the university library. Swales and his research team talked to past and present employees about the history of the building. He also used observations, document and correspondence analysis, as well as carried out text-based interviews with a selected group of employees on each floor of the building. From this material, textual life histories were put together of seven of the people who worked in the building, four from the University Herbarium (the section that looks after the University’ collection of dried plants) and three from the English Language Institute, including Swales himself.

Swales found that people on each floor of his building wrote quite different texts, even though they were all working at the same institution. They also found the writers’ professional and academic histories, and their life commitments had an important influence on what they wrote and how they wrote it. An outcome of the project was a reconsideration of the notion of “discourse community” (Swales, 1990). As Swales (1998b) points out, neither the university as a whole nor the building in which he carried out his study could be considered a single discourse community, of its own. He then introduces the notion of “place discourse community” to account for this kind of grouping; that is, a group of people who regularly work together, and who use a range of spoken, spoken-written, and written genres that have evolved during the existence of their particular discourse community.

What Swales’ project tells us is that there is not just the one single discourse community in academic institutions that students have to learn about, or

write for. It also tells us that there may be quite different ways of doing things in parts of an institution which are physically very close to each other. Also, different writers within the same part of an academic (or place) discourse community may have their own preferences for ways of doing things, which, if they are important or influential in their particular setting, may influence how other people write as well. Swales study, thus, has important theoretical and practical implications for the teaching of academic writing, particularly in ESP settings.

A textography of art and design exegeses

A study that looked at the exegeses that art and design students write in their masters degrees took a similar approach to Swales' work on textographies (Paltridge, 2004). An exegesis is a written text which accompanies a visual project submitted as the research component of the student's masters degree. These texts are similar in some ways to what is called the thesis² genre, but in many ways, are also quite different. The exegesis expands on the methodology, parameters, and context of the visual project, rather being a stand-alone piece of work in its own right, as is the case with a more traditional research thesis.

In this study, a study of the exegeses was combined with an examination of the texts that surrounded the texts. Interviews were also carried out with students, advisors, and examiners of the exegeses. This was done in order to explore the particular nature and character of the students' texts, the values that underlay the texts, and the role the texts played in the particular academic setting; that is, to examine the texts, role and context of the students' texts (Johns, 1997). The MA prospectus, MA publicity material, the postgraduate student handbook, the guide to examiners, examiners' reports, and the annual report on the MA programme were also examined. Six students, three supervisors, three examiners, and the program leader were interviewed for the study. Eleven exegeses were examined.

Each of the interviews followed the same basic format (see Figure 1) although space was allowed for interviewees to provide extra information and to elaborate on particular points that had not been covered in the initial set of questions.

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- What is the purpose of the text?
 - What is appropriate content for the text?
 - Who is the intended audience for the text?
 - What do you think is the audience's role and purpose in reading the text?
 - How would you describe the relationship between the readers and writer of the text?
 - Are there any particular expectations and conventions for the text?
 - What background knowledge, values, and understandings do you think it is assumed the writer of the text will share with their readers?
 - How would you describe the relationship between the texts and the visual component that accompanies the text?
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Figure 1. Supervisor, examiner and student interview questions.

The framework for analysis of the data drew on Grabe & Kaplan's (1996) notion of an ethnography of writing (see Paltridge 2004 & 2006 for further discussion of this). The analysis considered the social and cultural context in which the writing occurred as well as other aspects of the situation in which the texts were written and how these impact upon what a student writes. Factors that were considered included:

- the setting of the text;
- the focus and perspective of the text;
- the purpose/s of the text;
- the intended audience for the text, their role and purpose in reading the text;
- the relationship between writers and readers of the text;
- discourse community expectations, conventions and requirements for the text;
- the background knowledges, values, and understandings it is assumed the student shares with their readers, including what is important to their reader and what is not;
- the relationship the text has with other texts.

The analysis, thus, focuses on important contextual aspects of the students' texts and the situation in which they occur, each of which is strongly interconnected, and interacts with each other. For example, the level of study has an important influence on the student's text, as does the purpose of the text. The analysis considered the content of the text and, in particular, appropriate content for the text. The acceptability (or not) of certain points

of view and claims were also considered. Another issue that was explored was the intended audience for the students' texts and how the students' readers might react to what they read; that is, the criteria they use for assessing the students' text including what is important to the students' readers and what is not. A further issue was the relationship between the writer and reader/s of the students' texts and how this impacts on what the student says in their text; that is, whether the students were "novices writing for experts", "apprentices writing for admission to an area of study" or both, and the extent to which students have to tell their audience what they already know.

Other issues included discourse community expectations for the texts, shared understandings between writers and reader/s of the texts, and background knowledge assumed by the texts. This included consideration of the particular expectations, conventions, and requirements of art and design as a field of study, how an exegesis might typically be organized and what style of language a student should use. Other considerations were the level of critical analysis required of students and the level of originality expected of them. The project, thus, aimed to uncover the background knowledges, values, and understandings it is assumed that students will share with the readers of their texts. The collection of exegesises examined covered a range of different topics and kinds of visual project. These are summarized in Table 1.

Academic staff and students often used the term "thesis" to refer to exegesises when, in many ways, they were referring to quite a different kind of text and quite a different site of production and assessment from the more traditional research thesis (or dissertation). For example, the academic setting of an exegesis in art and design is different from that of many other academic areas of study in that it is based on a less traditional view of what "research" is, and how it is conceptualized. The weighting of the exegesis also varied between pieces of writing making it hard, in some ways, to compare one outcome with another. The purpose of an exegesis in art and design is also somewhat different from that of a more traditional thesis in that there may be less display of knowledge in the students' texts, even though students are still writing to convince their reader of what they know and the depth to which they know it.

The place of the exegesis in the students' future lives is also very different from that of many thesis writers in that they are not writing "to become members of an academic community". Visual arts students, one of the

supervisors said, fell into the anomalous situation that when they leave the university, they are no longer required to do the writing that they do there, which is quite different from the situation of people who might continue to do research-based written work after the completion of their masters degree. What is more, art and design students do not need the masters degree to validate their position in the field in the same way that masters students in other areas of study might. Exegesis writers, then, are not always writing “for admission to the academy” in the sense that thesis and dissertation writers in other areas of study often are.

Title of the exegesis	The visual project
Being Chinese	An installation of artwork pieces (paintings, Chinese papercuts and cabinet boxes)
Seeing beyond sight: The poetics of line	A compilation of line drawings presented in a loose-leaf atlas, a public exhibition of line drawings, and an extended piece of poetry in spoken and written form
Public outdoor furniture design: Capturing the ethos of the city	A series of benches and tables designed for an outdoor public space
Myth of the cave: Art (?) and the dissection of meaning	A set of paintings presented as a CD ROM
Dressing the tarot	A set of costumes presented as a portfolio of photographic images, an installation, and a choreographed performance
The new pencil: Towards developing a challenging curriculum in computer imaging for art and design undergraduate education	A poster session of computer generated images
Natural dying: An evocative expression	An exhibition of hand dyed and knitted wearable art
Deconstructing the inscrutable; Wabi Sabi, a Japanese evaluation of beauty and design	A CD ROM and installation using ceramics and mixed media
Still life re-framed	An installation of paintings, fruit and vegetables, and mixed media
Secret site: A investigative narrative of the notion of artistic identity	An exhibition of photographs
Fade away and radiate	A set of public installations, incorporating video and work placed on a web site

Table 1. Titles of the exegeses and their visual projects (Paltridge, 2004: 91).

While some academic conventions still hold for writers of exegeses, such as the need to acknowledge sources and to list references, there was much more latitude in these texts in terms of how this could be done. Students were still expected to present a coherent argument and to convince their readers, but the ways in which they could do this varied much more than in traditional

theses. There were several cases of students submitting their exegeses after their oral examination, a situation that would never occur within the context of a more traditional approach to thesis examination. Students in art and design, then, are more able to resist some of the academic conventions and examination procedures for this kind of writing that might hold in more traditional areas of study which have a more established place (and a different role) in the academy.

A textography of Chinese College English writing

A textography of the writing component of the two main Chinese university College English tests, College English Test 4 (CET 4) and College English Test 6 (CET 6) was carried out with a group of English language teachers at a large research university in China (Paltridge, 2007). College English refers to compulsory English classes that non-English majors in Chinese universities are required to undertake as part of their degree. At the end of their studies many students need to pass a nationally administered College English test in order to graduate from their degrees.

The particular aim of the project was to examine expectations and requirements of the writing component of two College English tests, CET 4 and CET 6, two key examinations in Chinese university English language education (Chinese College English Education and Supervisory Committee, 2007; Du, 1998; Xu, 2005). This was done so that insights that were gained could be accounted for in College English classes. At present the only material available in China for use in these classes are sets of practice tests, and course books which mirror the format of the tests. There are few public statements on the assessment process, expectations and requirements of the test. The study looked at sample tests, College English teaching materials, model texts provided in College English textbooks and the published curriculum requirements for College English courses. Focus group discussions were held with College English teachers. Examiners of the test were also interviewed.

The writing task that students are required to complete in CET 4 and CET 6 is a guided exercise of no less than one hundred words for CET4 and one hundred and twenty words for CET6. The student's text usually consists of three paragraphs, made up of a topic paragraph, a developing paragraph and a concluding paragraph. A maximum of 15 points is awarded to the piece of

writing, accounting for 15 per cent of an overall 100 points for the test (Du, 1998). If a student gets zero for the writing section of the test, they fail the College English test (Jin & Yang, 2006). There is, however, no official regulation as to what constitutes a passing score in the test. This is up to each university to decide.

There are two aspects to the assessment criteria used for assessing students' texts: language proficiency and content. This includes accuracy of grammar, accuracy of sentence structure and appropriate use of text structure. Students are also expected to show an ability to follow writing instructions. They are expected to show clear organization in their texts as well as the ability to develop an argument. They are also expected to show they are able to write texts that are "complete in content" and "appropriate in diction"; that is, they need to include appropriate content for the writing task and show an ability to use appropriate vocabulary for the text that they write. If students do not cover the content asked for in the instructions, marks are deducted from the student's grade.

The study revealed a number of features that are highly valued in College English writing tests, such as the use of English proverbs, the use of complex sentence structures, the expression of personal opinions, the ability to write to the word limit (students lose marks for writing below the word length), and clear handwriting (assessors grade a lot of texts in a very short time). It also revealed assessment processes, such as the use of "range finder" texts (model texts at a range of different scores) to make an initial assessment of the quality of students' writing. The use of sample texts is not uncommon for rater training (see White (1984) or Cushing Weigle (2002), for instance). Range finder texts are used in the training of raters for the GRE (Graduate Record Examinations) in the US, for example (Education Testing Service, 2004). It is, however, less common for range finder texts to be used in the actual assessment of students' texts.

No use of source texts is required in the students' texts to support an argument, which is different from much English academic writing. Memorization of model texts is approved of in some testing centers, the College English teachers said, but not in others. The relationship between the student's texts and the range finder answers is also important; that is, the extent to which the student's text is similar to one of the set of sample texts (which students never see) in terms of content and use of language. Through this research, then, we gained insights into the assessment of students' texts that we would not have gained by looking at the test or at

examples of students' texts alone. The information that we gathered, beyond the text, is as important for students sitting these tests as information about the texts themselves. All of this knowledge contributes to the genre expertise that students need to develop as they learn to write texts which help them achieve their particular goals.

As a number of authors have shown, College English tests have an enormous effect on English teaching in Chinese universities. College English tests are also used as a way of measuring the quality of College English teaching in Chinese universities (Du, 1998; Feng, 2003; Xu, 2005) as well as, through the publication of statistical data in official documents, as a way of establishing academic reputations for individual institutions (Feng, 2003). Student pass rates in College English tests are also important for individual teachers for their prospects of promotion (Feng, 2001). If foreign teachers go to work in China, as many teachers now do, an analysis of the kind described in this paper can tell them things they need to know that they may not expect, or anticipate, from their teaching of academic writing elsewhere in the world. McPherron (2006), for example, describes exactly this situation when he went to China to teach in a Chinese university and, as he did so, became aware of the pressures of College English tests on the students' view of what they wanted to be taught. Armed with communicative methodologies he went there (and was encouraged by his employer) to help students improve their spoken communicative abilities. The students, however, asked for more grammar and writing practice knowing, no doubt, how much they needed to be able to write for the College English tests. Looking at College English textbooks, model answers and practice tests would have provided him with examples of the kinds of texts his students needed to write. It would not, however, have given him an understanding of what students in this particular setting need to know "beyond the text" (Freedman, 1999) in order to succeed in this kind of writing, and what teachers need to know in order to help them do this.

Textographies and student writing

Textographies are also useful for students who are learning to write in new and different academic settings. Woodrow (2006) describes an academic writing course which combines the notion of an ethnography of writing with Johns' (1997) work on "students as researchers" as a way of getting students to investigate the academic setting in which they are writing and the

values and expectations which underlie the texts they are being asked to produce. As with the projects described above, the teaching in this course goes “beyond syntactic structures, vocabulary and composing” (Hyland, 2007: 150) to investigate the ways in which language is used in specific writing contexts. As Hyland (2007: 149) points out:

[...] classrooms are now more culturally, socially, and linguistically diverse places than ever before. These students bring with them different identities, understandings, and habits of meaning-making to their learning, and teachers cannot assume that students’ learning experiences will provide them with appropriate writing schemata for their studies.

Today’s students, further, “come from very different backgrounds than their teachers; they have different intellectual objectives, and they think and learn in different ways” (Duderstadt, 2000: 22). They are far more diverse in terms of language background, race, gender, nationality, educational and economic background than the people who teach them, creating new tensions in academic teaching. Clearly, then, the teaching of academic writing needs to focus on more than just the development of students’ linguistic competencies. Producing an academic text means much more than producing a text that looks like ones that are usually produced in a particular setting (Dias et al., 1999). It also includes an understanding of the social and cultural context in which the text occurs as well as how this impacts upon what students can (and can’t) say in their written texts.

In her course, Woodrow’s (2006) students interview their teachers and ask them questions not just about what they want them to write, but also why they want them to write it. The aim of her course is to train students to “navigate disciplinary contexts rhetorically” (Bawarshi, 2003: 154) as well as negotiate the boundaries, values and expectations of the disciplines in which they are writing. The course also aims to help students to uncover the genre knowledge that is required of them to succeed in their particular academic setting. It is only when they are aware of this, she has found, that they are really able to understand what they are being asked to do, and the extent to which they can negotiate what they do, should they wish to do so.

Woodrow’s (2006) course draws on three key notions, the view of academic literacies, in the plural sense, John’s (1997) work on students as researchers and, again the idea of an ethnography of writing to guide the questions students ask and as a way of them framing the answers to their questions. The notion of academic literacies comes from the work of Lea & Street

(1998 & 1999) and others (Starfield, 2007) who see learning to write in the academy as learning to acquire a repertoire of linguistic practices which are based on complex sets of discourses, identities, and values. The notion of academic literacies is also important in the work of writers such as Zamel & Spack (1998: ix) who argue that “it is no longer possible to assume that there is one type of literacy in the academy” and one academic culture in the university whose norms and practices simply have to be learnt in order for our students to have access to our institutions, and its ways of writing.

Johns (1997) recognises the difficulty this creates for students, arguing that we need to train students to “act as researchers”, to ask questions of the texts they are required to produce, of the context in which their texts are located, and the people who will be reading and judging the effectiveness of their texts as a way of helping them write texts that consider the institutional and audience expectations of their particular field of study, as well as the knowledge and skills that are necessary for membership of their academic community.

Woodrow’s (2006) students carry out an analysis of the social and cultural context in which the text they are writing occurs, and consider how the various components of the situation in which they are writing impacts upon what they write and how they write it. They do this to try and get an insider’s perspective on the institutional and audience expectations for their academic writing as well as unpack the values and requirements they need to negotiate in order to achieve their academic goals. As these students learn, texts and assignments tasks vary according to discipline, task, class, teacher, and a number of other factors (Samraj, 2002; Johns, 2007). Academic genres cannot be taught formulaically. It is essential, then, for students to explore these kinds of contextual factors before they begin reading for, and writing their assignments (Johns 2007). As Macbeth (2006: 182) has argued:

[...] all of us enter the university as novices [...] Even so, those of us who arrive without familiarity of the kinds of writing that will be expected of us usually struggle the most. This seems to be as true of those of us who are native speakers of English as well as those of us who are learning English as another language.

The key, then, is “how a newcomer to the academic community goes about learning its sociocultural practices” (Macbeth, 2006: 181) and how we might help students to do this. The use of textographies, I would suggest, is one way in which this might be done.

Conclusion

This paper has aimed to show how projects which combine both textual and ethnographic approaches to the examination of academic writing can strengthen the observations made by each of these approaches. As Jorgensen & Phillips (2002: 153) point out, every research perspective “produces a particular understanding of the phenomenon under study.” The use of one approach in combination with another can be used to provide a fuller, and more explanatory perspective on the question under investigation than just the use of a single approach (see Taylor, 2001a & 2001b, for further discussion of this). Textographies are one way in which research approaches might be combined in academic writing research, providing a more situated and contextualized basis (Swales & Luebs, 1995) for understanding student writing in the social, cultural, and institutional setting in which it takes place than might be obtained by just looking at students’ texts alone.

Projects of this kind, then, examine “the forces outside the individual which help guide purposes, establish relationships, and ultimately shape [student’s] writing” (Hyland, 2003: 18). In particular, they can uncover “what can and cannot be said and done” (Johns et al., 2006: 244) within a particular genre; as well as the goals, assumptions and values that are presupposed by expert readers of the students’ texts. That is, they can make visible to students the choices and constraints (Devitt, 2004) available in the writing they are doing so that they “can locate themselves and begin to participate within these genres more meaningfully” (Johns et al., 2006: 245) and, hopefully, more successfully.

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NOTES

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² The terms "thesis" and "dissertation" are used in different ways in different parts of the world. In the US, honours and masters students write "theses" whereas in Britain, they write "dissertations". At the PhD level, a US student writes a "dissertation" and a student at a British university writes a "thesis". In Australia, the term "thesis" is used for both the masters and doctoral degrees.

