

‘Academic literacies’: sustaining a critical space on writing in academia

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Abstract

In this paper, I briefly track the emergence and foci of academic literacies as a field of inquiry, summarising its contributions to understandings about writing and meaning making in academia. Writing from my specific geohistorical location in the UK, I foreground the importance of early key works that encapsulated concerns about deficit orientations to students’ language and literacy practices (e.g. Ivanič, 1998; Lea and Street, 1998). I also underline the transnational dimension to the development of academic literacies which has helped drive forward intellectual debates about the relationship between academic language and literacy practices, and participation in academia. I argue that academic literacies provides an important space for critically exploring what are often taken-for-granted assumptions about the nature and value of academic writing conventions, and the ways these (both assumptions and conventions) impact on opportunities for participation in knowledge making. This critical thinking space continues to serve as an intellectual resource for researchers, teachers and students in contemporary neo-liberal higher education, where regimes of evaluation are super-normative, even in (or because of) a context of super-diversity, that is increased mobility of peoples and semiotic practices. Academic literacies as praxis necessarily involves straddling both normative and transformative orientations (Lillis and Scott, 2007) or what Hall (1992) refers to as the ‘academic’ and ‘intellectual’ dimensions to academia.

Keywords: academic writing; literacy practices; writing pedagogy; writing research.

Introduction

My aim in this paper is to briefly outline what I see as the contribution of academic literacies over the past 20 years to understandings about writing in the academy. Tracking the emergence and foci of academic literacies and its future relevance to both theory and practice, I argue that academic literacies provides an important space for critically exploring what are often taken-for-granted assumptions about the nature and value of academic writing conventions for participation in knowledge making. Such a critical thinking space continues to serve as an intellectual resource for researchers, teachers and students in a neo-liberal higher education, where regimes of evaluation are super-normative, even in (or because of) a context of super-diversity, that is increased mobility of peoples and semiotic practices.

Academic literacies: my specific geo-historical-institutional location

The relatively small field that has come to be known as 'academic literacies' in the UK emerged from a specific historical-institutional context: the expansion of higher education and the increased participation of both 'local' and 'international' students. The former development was part of an official 'widening access' agenda and represented a move away from a highly exclusive system in the UK, in which the participation rate of 18–20 year-olds was still only 15 per cent in the 1980s. Current figures stand at 44% of people aged between 18 and 20; 'international students' constitute 19% of the student population overall (Universities UK, 2017; HESA, 2018). The shift away from a university premised on the participation of a small, elite and (on the surface at least) relatively homogeneous student population put the spotlight on issues of *diversity* – of students' experiences of life, learning, of language, literacy and semiotic practices – and made visible a significant gap between students and the academy in terms of understandings and expectations (one long-since documented example of the clearly non-homogenous nature of academia is gender – see for example JEAP Special Issue on Gender and academic writing 2018, 32). This gap included the mismatch between the language and literacy practices valued by the academy and the practices in which many students engaged (for overviews, see Lillis and Scott, 2007; Lillis, 2014; Lillis and Tuck, 2015). The specific historical-institutional context of 'widening access' in the UK served as an imperative for explorations of what it means to

write in academia; at the same time, I think that such explorations indexed a context in which many teachers, researchers and students were hungry for articulations of academic literacy experiences that connected in richer ways with daily lived academic practice.

Research publications began to appear which offered accounts of students' experiences of writing in higher education and tutor-student relations around writing. Such research was mostly carried out by teacher-researchersⁱ driven by pedagogic concerns, but in putting the spotlight on students' experience of writing (and usually implicit practices of writing pedagogy) research made visible conventional practices of the academy, including disciplinary discourses and academic rhetorical traditions (e.g. Street, 1996; Ivanič, 1998; Lea and Street, 1998; Candlin and Hyland, 1999; Jones et al., 1999; Lea and Stierer, 2000; Lillis, 1997, 2001; Turner 2011, 2018). As the field grew in labour (reflected in published outputs, conferences, seminars) and intellectual confidence, the lens widened to include a focus on the everyday writing of academics (Lea and Stierer, 2009), disciplinary teachers' perspectives on their engagement with students' writing (Tuck, 2018), professional writing (Rai, 2004) academic writing for publication (Lillis and Curry, 2010) and digitally mediated literacy practices inside and outside the academy (Lea and Jones, 2011; Coleman, 2012; Goodfellow and Lea, 2013).

The key contribution of academic literacies over the past twenty years has been to make visible dimensions to academic writing which often tend to be ignored including the following:

- The gap in assumptions and understandings between students and tutors about academic writing conventions and the value of such conventions for knowledge making (e.g. Ivanič, 1998; Jones et al., 1999; Lillis, 2001; Lea, 2004).
- The problematic assumption that it is relatively straightforward to teach and learn literacy practices nested in academia (e.g. Lea and Stierer, 2000; Scott, 2017), and that 'academic writing' – apparently once learned – is transferable from one context to another (e.g. Ivanič, 1998; Lea and Street, 1998; Ivanič et al., 2009).
- The importance of identity/ies (real, aspirational, changing over time) in the academic writing of students, teachers, professionals (e.g. Rai, 2004; Lillis and Curry, 2010; McMullan, 2017; Tuck, 2018).

- The need to challenge a deficit approach and shift the emphasis away from what writers 'can't do' towards a focus on the range of semiotic practices in which writers do engage (or wish to engage) alongside an exploration of institutional ideologies underpinning conventions of knowledge making (e.g. Lea and Street, 1998; Turner, 2017; Lillis, 2018).
- The importance of opening up debate about the epistemological value of dominant as well as alternative/marginal discursive and rhetorical practices and possible consequences for participation in academia (e.g. English, 2011; McKenna, 2012; 2015).

There is evidence to indicate that questions raised by academic literacies work, whilst clearly working from institutional and disciplinary margins, has made some impact on more dominant frames of reference, for example study skills in higher education (e.g. Haggis, 2003); EAP (e.g. Harwood and Hadley, 2004; Harvey and Stocks, 2017); and SFL (e.g. Coffin and Donohue, 2012).

Academic literacies as social practice: a framework of transnational connection

The phrase 'academic literacies' has been in use with different specific meanings in different contexts (see discussion Lillis and Scott, 2007) but is widely used to signal a *critical and social practice perspective on writing and reading in the academy*. This emphasis on academic writing as a social practice involving issues of power and identity had/s of course been articulated by teacher-researchers in the UK who did/do not use the term in the UK (e.g. Ivanič, 1998) and from a number of different geo-historical disciplinary traditions, for example, in the USA, Horner and Lu (e.g. 1999), in France, Delcambre and Donohue (e.g. 2015), in Argentina, Carlino (e.g. 2013), in Chile, Avila Reyes (e.g. 2017), in Peru, Zavala (e.g. 2009), in South Africa, Thesen (e.g. 1997) to name just a few scholars.

However, the use of the phrase in the 1998 publication by Lea and Street consolidated its intellectual currency in configuring the field locally and transnationally for the many scholars who were dissatisfied with dominant pedagogical and institutional approaches to student writing. The Lea and Street paper fulfilled three important scholarly functions:

1. The plural 'academic literacies' explicitly indexed the field of "New Literacy Studies" and Street's robust critique of "autonomous" approaches to literacy. Rather than the dominant position on literacy as autonomous – whereby literacy is viewed as a single and universal phenomenon with assumed cognitive as well as economic benefits – Street argued for what he called an ideological model of literacy – whereby the focus is on acknowledging the socioculturally embedded nature of literacy practices and the associated power differentials in any literacy related activity (Street, 1984).
2. It opened up routes of intellectual inquiry that differed from the available normative approaches – including academic approaches – with which many scholars were dissatisfied, drawing on practitioner experience (e.g. Lea, 2004).
3. It helped create a theoretically and empirically robust position from which to articulate the nature of existing available frameworks for thinking about academic writing (e.g. as study skills, EAP) and to challenge the prevailing ideology of deficit. (N.B: These points are adapted from Lillis et al., 2015.p.8).

The phrase 'academic literacies' has helped mediate intellectual transnational conversations about academic writing (as illustrated, for example, in Russell et al., 2009; Lillis et al., 2015; Scott, 2017.), in particular, I would argue, fostering rich conversations between scholars in the UK and South Africa. Whilst operating out of radically different socio-institutional conditions and bound by complex and troublesome post-colonial histories, teacher-researchers have been discussing their shared concerns through publications and virtual, as well as face to face, encounters for the past twenty years. One obvious reason for the rich and sustained engagement between scholars in the two sites is that the widening access agenda in higher education emerged at a similar moment in time but also the importance attached in both contexts to the relationship between power, identity and linguistic/semiotic resources (e.g. Thesen, 1997; Angelil-Carter, 1998; McKenna, 2004; Thesen and Van Pletzen, 2006; Kapp, 2012; Paxton and Frith, 2014; Coleman, 2016). Given the official policy of multilingualism (11 official languages) and strongly evident traditions of multimodal meaning making in South Africa, the issue of exactly how multiple linguistic and semiotic resources can be used as resources for learning and academic work evinces an urgency which is sometimes lacking in UK based research.

Work in South Africa has more recently directed UK academic literacies thinking by theorising student and scholarly writing in the context of globalisation and internationalisation, raising questions about what Blommaert (2010) refers to as 'placed resources' in a contemporary higher education premised on neoliberal policies of globalisation. Within the context of globalisation and mobility of students, scholars and their semiotic resources, risk is highlighted as a highly significant dimension to agency, writing and knowledge making: what will and can be said in writing? Using which semiotic resources? What are the consequences for individuals, research teams, institutions and nations? (see, for example, Thesen and Cooper, 2014).

Academic literacies: a concern with transformation

The epistemology of language and literacy as social practice in academic literacies has always been inflected by an ideology of transformation. Of course, exactly what is meant by transformation is an issue of ongoing debate (see, for example, the different perspectives of Harrington, Lea, Lillis and Mitchell, in Lillis et al., 2015 pp.8-17), and it tends to be co-opted in different ways in different geo-historical (see, for example, Thesen and Van Pletzen, 2006 for South Africa). But in broad terms, 'transformation' is used in academic literacies to signal a contrast with the dominant normative orientation to academic writing (and indeed to writing in general, see Lillis, 2013) where the emphasis is on standard language(s), a relatively static notion of academic conventions and the imperative to socialise (explicitly or implicitly) students into practices, increasingly dictated by rigid evaluative regimes (Lillis, 2018). A transformative orientation involves us asking questions about the intellectual value of dominant academic writing conventions and orientations to language and literacy, and the ways in which these shape opportunities for participation in – rather than simply access to – academia.

Transformation in terms of a research orientation to writing can be summarised as a shift away from a sole or primary focus on the text – what Horner calls the 'textual bias' (1999) – towards the ethnographic study of practices. Methods adopted in academic literacies typically involve a combination of observation of the practices surrounding the production

of texts – rather than focusing solely on written texts – as well as participants' perspectives on the texts and practices.

Transformation with regard to pedagogy and policy represents particular challenges because as teacher-researchers we are necessarily bound to the evaluative regimes we often criticise. In order to underline the necessary importance attached to both the normative and the transformative, I include here an extract from a paper Mary Scott and I wrote some 15 years ago:

The ideological stance towards the object of study in what we are calling 'academic literacies' research can be described as explicitly *transformative* rather than *normative*. A normative approach evident for example in much EAP work can be summarised as resting on the educational myths that Kress (2007) describes: the homogeneity of the student population, the stability of disciplines, and the unidirectionality of the teacher-student relation. Consonant with these myths is an interest to 'identify and induct': the emphasis is on identifying academic conventions – at one or more levels of grammar, discourse or rhetorical structure or genre – and on (or with a view to) exploring how students might be taught to become proficient or 'expert' and developing materials on that basis (for examples, see Flowerdew, 2000; Swales and Feak, 2004). **A transformative approach in contrast involves an interest in such questions but in addition is concerned with:** a) locating such conventions in relation to specific and contested traditions of knowledge making; b) eliciting the perspectives of writers (whether students or professionals) on the ways in which such conventions impinge on meaning making; c) exploring alternative ways of meaning making in academia, not least by considering the resources that (student) writers bring to the academy

(Lillis and Scott, 2007, pp.12-13, bolding added)

Criticism of academic literacies often seems to: a) ignore the fact that academic literacies teacher-researchers necessarily engage with normative practices as part of their/our daily work in academia (also evident in publications, as above; see also, for example, Coffin et al., 2002); b) fail to acknowledge that a transformative approach is necessary both in order to understand writers' practices and desires and in order to open up meaning/knowledge-making spaces. There is also some conflation by some critics of academic literacies

between *texts* and *textualist*, with some researchers conflating the textualist critique (referred to above) with a presumed lack of interest in texts (e.g. Wingate and Tribble, 2012). A concern with academic writing necessarily involves a concern with academic writing as textual product – but textual product as nested within/constitutive of a particular social practice.

But it is of course challenging to develop ways of working with academic writing which enacts a transformative orientation in pedagogy, curriculum design and pedagogy. Examples of how teacher-researchers are working with academic literacies in enacting a transformative – in addition to a normative – stance is illustrated in an open access book which arose directly in response to the following questions:

1. What does working with academic literacies mean 'in practice'?
2. How can the transformative approach argued for in academic literacies' theorizing be instantiated in practice(s)?
3. In developing a transformative approach, how might work in academic literacies usefully draw on and engage with other approaches to writing?

The phrase 'working with' is used to underline academic literacies as a heuristic and resource for praxis (as articulated, for example, by Gimenez and Thomas, 2015) not as a specified programme to be implemented in policy and pedagogy. As Tuck argues,

Academic literacies, although practitioner-led, has never been about developing pedagogical guidelines and blueprints but about a creating a design space for "questioning and change" (Mitchell and Evison, 2006), a critical and dialogic approach which can sit within a range of different institutional and curricular locations

(Tuck, 2012, p.116, translated from French original)

And, as Mitchell articulates, this is a design space which is always open to further questioning: 'any transformative goal is never finalized; being socially, politically, ideologically constructed, what counts as "good" or "better" is always rightly the object of further scrutiny' (Mitchell, 2015, p.17).

Contributions in the book, *Working With Academic Literacies: Case Studies Towards Transformative Practice* (Lillis et al., 2015) include work by 61 scholars from 11 national contexts and a wide range of disciplinary fields – including medicine, engineering, photojournalism, nursing, economics – at both under- and post-graduate levels. The very different contributions illustrate ways in which teacher-researchers are working with academic literacies as praxis, organised under four main sections: Transforming pedagogies of academic writing and reading; Transforming the work of teaching; Transforming resource, genres and semiotic practice; Transforming institutional framings of academic writing (Lillis et al., 2015).

Academic literacies: sustaining a critical space in strongly evaluative regimes

In concluding this brief overview, I want to argue that academic literacies provides a space for exploring, understanding and questioning what it means to do academic writing/to be an academic writer in contemporary academia and necessarily involves a reflexivity on our part to question our assumptions and practices as well as our safe disciplinary and pedagogical anchors (see, for example, Turner, 2012). This can be an uncomfortable space to inhabit: not, from my experience, when working with student-writers who seem to appreciate the opportunity to openly discuss, for example, conventions and their feelings about them, whilst at the same time working within those conventions and/or working out where to push at the boundaries, but rather from a rigidity within academic practices which seems to lead too easily to an acceptance of the evaluative regimes we work within as if these were self-evidently valid and meaningful. This is not surprising. Rigid orientations towards writing in all domains – what it is, should be, is and does – continue to be very powerful (see Lillis and McKinney, 2013).

Creating questioning spaces about academic work – including writing – continues to be important in a higher education which is currently dominated by a neoliberal agenda characterised by the marketisation of all aspects of academic labour, including labour around writing (see discussion by Neculai, 2018) and a particular brand of globalisation, where increased diversity of peoples, experiences and semiotic practices is matched not

by an increased valuing of diversity but by ever more rigid systems of evaluation (of students, of scholars as in, for example, the REF in the UK).

The more we see the academic world – as a socio-political and economic system – being 'concentrated' into one unified competitive industry, the more we can expect 'rationalized' mononormativity to prevail

(Blommaert in conversation with Horner, 2017, p.14)

As teacher-researchers working within the institution of academia, interested in not only teaching the rules of the game but in questioning how these rules enable or constrain particular kinds of knowledge making and participation, we necessarily inhabit a - normative- transformative space. This echoes in some ways Stuart Hall's distinction between 'academic' and, what he calls, 'deadly serious intellectual' work: the former is necessarily conservative, anchoring our teaching and research to institutional structures, practices and ideologies, the latter is necessarily open, a critical space where we are always grappling to understand, theorise and act, always, to use Hall's words, 'wrestling with the angels' (Hall, 1992, p.281).

As teacher-researchers participating in academia, we have a responsibility to enable writers to practise successfully academic writing within existing rhetorical conventions – to work within what Worsham, drawing closely on Hall, refers to as the 'relatively narrow and policed goals and interest of a given discipline' (Olson and Worsham, 2003, p.7). However, we also have a responsibility to explore how historically dominant and alternative conventions enable and constrain different kinds of intellectual, emotional, aesthetic and ethical work, and thus particular kinds of participation in knowledge-making practices. I see working within/across the transformative-normative as a necessary given of my academic-intellectual existence.

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ⁱ The issue of giving a label to who we are is far from straightforward and whilst hugely important is not within the scope of this paper. Labels are often linked to our conditions of service but vary historically, from institution to institution, even within institutions. How we refer to ourselves may vary over time, even in the course of a day, depending on the specific role we choose (or are required) to occupy institutionally. In this paper I use teacher-researchers throughout to signal people working in academia who have a commitment to pedagogy (whether referred to for example, as teacher, tutor, language/writing specialist, learning developer) and research (used in the broadest terms, including those who engage in substantial empirical research projects, as well as those who engage in ongoing exploration of their/own practice).