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Tensions between textbook pedagogy and the literacy practices of the disciplinary community: A study of writing in first year economics

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Abstract

This paper describes aspects of a research project which used linguistic and intertextual analysis of student writing to investigate the relationship between the academic curriculum and student voice in a first year economics course at a South African university. I argue that the discourses and practices of first year university economics textbooks provide a model of literacy practices which contradict many of the literacy practices of the discipline of economics. The first year economics textbook in particular, rather than exposing students to a variety of arguments and encouraging the development of critical reading skills appropriate for academic contexts, tends to be single voiced. This gives the impression of consensus in the discipline and it may encourage rote learning and plagiarism. This argument is supported with data from a research project.

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1. Introduction

This paper argues that the economics textbook, the main genre to which students are exposed in their undergraduate studies is not an appropriate model for learning the specialised literacy practices of the disciplinary community and that it may also encourage plagiarism. The paper draws on data from a larger research project (Paxton, 2003, 2004,

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2006) which used linguistic and intertextual analysis to investigate the intersection of the academic curriculum and student voices in first year economics assignments at the University of Cape Town (UCT). The findings of this research project highlighted the many and varied conflicts students encounter as newcomers to the practices and discourses of university economics, but, in this paper, I will focus particularly on the difficulties a diverse group of students from the larger case study had with the two first year economics textbooks used on the course, i.e., [McConnell and Brue \(1999\)](#) and [Mohr and Fourie \(2000\)](#). These difficulties are challenging enough for first language speakers of English but speakers of English as an additional language (EAL) from rural South African schools have an even greater struggle. The paper will begin by describing the theoretical and methodological insights used to frame the research, before going on to illustrate, by means of excerpts from assignments and interview data the ways in which students misinterpreted information in the textbook and plagiarised from it.

Textbooks play a very central role in economics, a role similar to that of textbooks in the sciences. The textbook is constantly referred to in economics lectures and tutorials and students are generally expected to have read the relevant sections of the textbook before they come to the lecture. In many first year courses only one textbook is set and it may be the only reading required for the course, therefore textbooks are often the only reading material that first year students encounter.

[Hyland \(2000, p. 105\)](#) distinguishes the discourse of the university textbook from disciplinary discourses by pointing out that it is a pedagogic discourse which uses what he describes as metadiscourse¹ to guide the reading process. Textbooks define the discipline presenting the principle concepts and analytical methods of the discipline. However, as [Brown \(1993, p. 65\)](#) indicates, in order to do this the discourse becomes “canonised” which means the multitude of past, contesting voices are presented as a single voice. In this way textbooks differ from other academic genres such as the research article² where research findings are presented, new claims made and theories disputed. In the research article, writers try to persuade the disciplinary community to accept their claims and certify them as recognised and legitimate knowledge, therefore claims need to be located within a wider disciplinary framework and other contributions to the field need to be formally acknowledged.

The difficulty for students lies in the fact that textbooks not only present the knowledge and values of the discipline, they also provide students with the first exemplar of the literacy practices of the new discipline. But the monologic nature of textbook writing does not prepare students for other economics texts they will encounter, neither does it demonstrate the ways in which academic writers weave their own voices through a multiplicity of other acknowledged voices.

In the analysis of student writing that formed part of my study ([Paxton, 2004](#)), I found a range of diverse discourses from the African oral and narrative traditions, the church, the television and the internet interlaced with the more academic discourses. However, there were also many instances of students simply regurgitating information from the textbook without properly understanding it because they found the language of the textbook

¹Metadiscourse has been described as “talk about talk” or the devices writers use to explicitly organise the text, engage the reader and signal attitude to the content and the reader ([Hyland, 2000, p. 104](#)).

²I have used the research article as an example of an academic genre and contrasted it with the textbook which is a pedagogic genre.

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