



Referencing as practice: Learning to write and reason with other people's texts in environmental engineering education



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ABSTRACT

The question of how university students learn to write from and reason with the accumulated knowledge of disciplinary fields that are new to them is a general concern for higher education. This type of challenge has commonly been researched from text-based perspectives and accordingly been addressed as a matter of intertextuality. Less common are studies that attend to phenomena of this kind as mediated processes where university students are being introduced to ways of incorporating earlier claims, arguments or 'facts' of specific fields in their writing. In response, this empirical paper investigates referencing as participation in disciplinary text practices and as socialization of genres in environmental engineering education. By video-based, detailed analyses of interaction and communication in a sequence of episodes where a draft for a writing assignment within sustainability assessment is being discussed, this paper analyses referencing as participants' concerns. A series of activities in these episodes demonstrate how referencing is dealt with as a communicative problem mediated by disciplinary discourse. As practice, referencing is handled as the work of recognizing, recontextualising and repurposing previous knowledge.

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1. Introduction

Learning to write and reason with the accumulated, textual knowledge of a disciplinary field by producing an academic paper of one's own is a demanding key process in higher education. Academic writing at this level commonly requires that students work with and reference other texts in order to establish an argumentation of their own that satisfies disciplinary conventions. On one hand, students therefore need to learn how to put the previous texts of specific, disciplinary fields into use for new purposes (Bazerman, 2004; Lemke, 2004; Prior, 1998). On the other hand, higher education institutions need to manage and teach such processes pedagogically. As disciplinary representatives, university teachers hold the responsibility for guiding students into more than the linguistic contents of texts (Lemke, 2004). They need to open up ontological and epistemological dimensions of referencing.

The problem of referencing can be seen as related to genre and social languages, i.e. previous claims have been made in certain circumstances, by certain groups of speakers and for certain purposes. In Bakhtin's sense, "there are no 'neutral' words" that can belong to no one. "Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all words and forms are populated by intentions." (Bakhtin, 1981, 293). As "a mode of social action" (Prior, 2006, 58) within academia, referencing becomes an instance of mediated, literate activity – a process of recontextualising messages (Vološinov, 1986) for new purposes. Accordingly, it is a form of participation in disciplinary discourse practices that rely on intertextual work (Bazerman, 2004; Wertsch, 1998).

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From such a sociocultural and dialogical perspective, the problem of learning to write and reason with other people's texts in disciplinary ways is understood as a matter of socialization, communication and meaning making (Prior, 1998, 2006). As a literate disciplinary activity, academic writing entails communicative and cognitive socialization, enacted as individuals increasingly begin to make sense of events and activities within a specific institutional practice (Mäkitalo, *in press*).

The analysis presented here attends to referencing² as multimodal text practices dealt with in supervision sessions.³ Here, environmental engineering scholars, in the role of university teachers, and international Master's students discuss drafts of emerging academic papers. Since such sessions are organized as scaffolds for university students' work with writing, they provide excellent opportunities to empirically analyse how referencing is put into play (Prior, 1998, 2001) and articulated. The disciplinary context of environmental engineering is particularly fruitful to analyse in this respect, since it draws upon and uses accumulated knowledge from several fields, for example ecology, economy and technology. What relevant, disciplinary ways of writing and reasoning with the previous written knowledge of such a hybrid field are mediated in this setting?

2. Reasoning with previous knowledge

There is a long tradition of investigating the work involved as students approach previous knowledge and disciplinary genres as textual practice (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995; Dressen-Hammouda, 2008; Hyland, 2004; Ivanic, 1998, 2005). Within such fields, the problem has often been viewed as a question of intertextuality (Correra, 2010; Shuart-Faris & Bloom, 2004) and sometimes through a lens of plagiarism (Pecorari, 2008). Similarly, perspectives within related fields have viewed the problem as a matter of discourse (Hyland, 2004, 2008), as language socialization (Duff, 2007) or academic discourse socialization (Duff, 2010; Maybin, 2008). The problem in focus for this paper though, is not only related to referencing as intertextual practice and discourse. It is about referencing in terms of learning how to recognize messages in others' texts and how to attend to these messages so that they become useful for new purposes. Within educational settings, this problem can be separated into two parts: there is the problem of recontextualising previous knowledge of specific, disciplinary fields; and, there is the problem of how this process is made recognizable and comprehensible to students.

Recently, Lymer, Lindwall, and Ivarsson (2011) investigated work of this kind within Architecture education. In their study of how architecture students are guided into disciplinary ways of using previous buildings in new design proposals, Lymer et al. formulate the concern as disciplinary relevancy: "A stock of knowledge of existing works of architecture – designs having currency in architectural discourse, as masterpieces or failures, as typical for an era, or as otherwise iconic – is actualized and made relevant" (199). Through a close, ethnomethodological investigation in the setting of the design critique as educational practice these researchers analysed how a professional architect responded to the way previous design solutions, i.e. references *per se*, were incorporated into a student design project, an extension for a parish house. The problem in this setting was that salient historical grounding of previous architecture was brought to the forefront of what was at stake in the students' proposal. Design concepts filled with intentions (in this case political messages) and firmly located in specific, historical realities had been unproblematically incorporated into a new proposal. As Lymer et al. point to the consequences of this, they gradually unveil how the message level, i.e. previous intentions and interests, has to be connected with and addressed in the new proposal. The original world of previous design needs to be taken onboard. Otherwise messages risk being incomprehensible in new contexts.

One particularly interesting consequence of this study is that it raises questions about what repurposing involves for novices who are approaching disciplinary fields that are new to them. What challenges are there as newcomers take on genres, or 'social languages' (Bakhtin, 1986), as a process of meaning making? One example of such an analysis is provided by Jansson (2006), who studied peer scaffolding as a way into the textual practices of engineering. By investigating two engineering students' articulation of a teacher's written comments to a text draft for a lab report, Jansson shows how contexts for the comments as well as for these students' text-in-progress are mediated. By attending to "manifest" and "embedded intertextuality" (673) this analysis demonstrates how the students interactively position the written comments to their text as utterances by their teacher through shifting of style, paraphrasing and a constant altering of "footing" (680, Jansson uses Goffman's notions of the term). Thereby, Jansson explains, the teacher becomes saliently present (684) in the conversation which results in the gradual shaping of the lab report from that perspective. As the students interactionally take on the teacher's position, the comments become practical and realizable for their own purpose. These results highlight how the work of contextualising the comments as belonging to the teacher also mediated a specific context for the emerging document. As the students made their way forward through a process of contextualising and recontextualising teacher comments in specific relation to a certain writing assignment, Jansson noticed how this form of meaning-making practice became a resource for repurposing messages.

The way the students in Jansson's study contextualize and recontextualise comments can be related to how Prior, Hengst, Roozen, and Shipka (2006) approach similar problems. In an article which addresses challenges in processes of repurposing something previous for new contexts, these scholars analyse recontextualisation as a multimodal process. They devise and take the unit of 'semiotic remediation practices' as their analytic starting point. In studies across a collection of settings (the pretend game, the composition class, and the staged comedy play) they explore dynamic processes of recontextualisation through multimodal analysis. Thereby, they address challenges of repurposing as 'reported speech and thought' and multimodal discourse

² More precisely, we focus on citation and use of sources.

³ This is what these activities are called in local jargon. The terminology for these kinds of activities differs in different cultural contexts but we use 'supervision session' or 'session' in this paper. It refers to a situation where a teacher recurrently meets a student to give comments on and guide the student through the process of writing an academic paper. The ultimate aim is for the student to learn how to write, reason and argue in ways relevant within the discipline.

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