



An exploration of how first year students are inducted into their discipline's academic discourses

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Induct
Academic literacies
Academic discourses
First year students
Scaffolding

ABSTRACT

The aim of this phenomenographic study was to investigate how first year students are inducted into the academic literacies of their discipline as this is often identified as a contributing factor to student experience. The study involved interviewing 35 students and five lecturers from a study program in an Australian university. The findings revealed: 1) there was disparity between different stakeholders' expectations about the learning and teaching needs of students in Higher Education; 2) not all first year students had the expected academic literacies to engage in the discourses of their discipline; 3) scaffolding of disciplinary literacies was not being undertaken consistently; and 4) lecturers were uncertain about the level of scaffolding that should be provided to first year students.

1. Introduction

It is generally accepted that in order to achieve positive learning outcomes in their study programs, students in Higher Education (HE) need to be proficient in the academic literacies of their discipline. However, proficiency in academic literacies varies amongst commencing students in HE as a consequence of the historical and social contexts of a discipline and academic abilities, language skills and cultural backgrounds of students (Elton, 2010; Goldingay et al., 2012). Studies undertaken in this field broadly confirm that academic literacies play a significant role in determining first year student's successful participation and engagement in their study program (Chanock, 2013; Walker & An-e, 2013; Wingate, 2012). Academic literacies are forms of "oral and written communication-genres, registers, graphics, linguistic structures; interactional patterns that are privileged, expected, cultivated, conventionalised, or ritualised" (Duff, 2010, p. 175). While studies have investigated the challenges first year students experience in relation to the acquisition these literacies (Buzzi, Grimes, & Rolls, 2012; Hocking & Fieldhouse, 2011; Walker & An-e, 2013) and considered programs implemented to address them (Chanock, Horton, Reedman, & Stephenson, 2010; Wingate, 2012), few have qualitatively examined how first year students are inducted into their discipline (Duff, 2010).

The preliminary qualitative investigation reported in this paper is thus important as it identifies lecturers and students' insights about how the development of academic literacies occurs in a study program. It has been argued that traditionally, research in HE generally focuses on the ways students can be trained to adjust to the practices undertaken by the institution (Gibbs, 1994). Investigations are often undertaken to examine how successfully students adhere to the conventions and principles that are already existent in their discipline and the university. These investigations generally do not explore lecturers or students' insights about the experience and reflections about the process itself. Conversely, Lea and Street (1998) contend that it is important to examine staff and student perspectives about their own literacy practices without prior assumptions. It is these premises that directed the investigation reported in this paper.

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2017.11.007>

Received 9 October 2017; Received in revised form 17 November 2017; Accepted 24 November 2017
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2. Academic literacies and learning

The academic literacies approach emerged as an alternative to other approaches that perceived literacies as distinct skills that students could master devoid of “language and communication...that are privileged, expected, cultivated, conventionalised or ritualised” (Duff, 2010, p. 175). In HE, academic literacies are often associated with specific “genres, genre sets and registers, and often relatively formal register, with subject-specific (disciplinary) linguistic, discursive and multimodal conventions” (Duff, 2010, p. 175). They also include other capabilities such as “critical thinking, database searching, familiarity with academic conventions such as referencing, use of formal register and the ability to manipulate a range of academic genres” (McWilliams & Allan, 2014, p. 3).

Advocates of the academic literacies approach see student writing and learning as issues at the level of epistemology and identities. The institutions in which the practices take place are perceived as sites of discourse and power. Literacy is recognised as involving a range of communicative practices, genres, fields as well as disciplines and students are expected to alternate between one context and another using an array of linguistic practices suitable for each context and simultaneously deal with the social meanings and identities that each suggests (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 59). Writing [and learning] is seen as a social practice into which students have to be inducted. The academic literacies approach focuses on practices rather than texts (Lillis & Scott, 2007).

The induction of students into the academic practices of their discipline should not be perceived lightly. Duff (2010, p. 69) suggests that student induction into their disciplinary literacies is a dynamic process that involves, “modelling, feedback and uptake; different levels of investment and agency on the part of learners; ... the negotiation of power and identities; and ... important personal transformations for at least some participants”. Effective acquisition of academic literacies occurs when the scaffolding and development unfolds over a course of a study program and is embedded in the content of courses (Lea & Street, 1998; Wingate, 2012).

The different ways students are inducted into their discipline’s literacies have been investigated in many parts of the world. As early as the 1980s, researchers in the United States (US) such as Bizzell (1982) and Bartholomae (1986) were concerned about the ways students were initiated into the literacy practices of their institution and discipline. Similar to Bizzell and Bartholomae, but with an anthropological lens, Ballard and Clanchy (1988) in Australia suggested that often students were not aware or did not understand the conventions and practices employed in HE. Thus they needed to be instructed on what these concepts were. Ballard and Clanchy suggested that students’ writing challenges could be addressed if the conventions and rules of a discipline’s literacies were made clear. Accordingly, in the United Kingdom (UK), Hounsell (1988) saw academic literacies as a ‘code’ that students could decipher if their inherent features are made explicit. Although in the US and UK the term ‘academic discourse’ was utilised instead of ‘literacies’, it was implied in all of these contexts that academic literacies comprise a set of practices that is employed by a community of practitioners. These practices are unique to the practitioners and context in which they operate. Some commencing students are challenged by these literacies. Therefore, students need to be made aware of what these practices are so that they are able to acquire and employ these conventions in their study program.

2.1. Academic literacies and first year students

First year students in higher education are often challenged by academic literacies (Chanock, 2000; Devereux & Wilson, 2008). This is progressively becoming a significant issue as there are more non-traditional students in universities today compared to the past. The National Centre for Education Statistics, United States (n.d.) defines non-traditional students as those who take a break from their studies after high school, study part-time and work full-time, have dependents, are single parents or have not completed high school. This category is further defined by the Department of Education and Training, Australia (2015) to include students who are Indigenous, have a disability, speak English as an Additional Language, from low socioeconomic backgrounds, from regional and remote areas or studying in non-traditional disciplines. Brady (2013) argues that non-traditional students ought to be taught the literacies of their discipline as they may be disadvantaged because of their economic, social and cultural capital. This is affirmed by Klinger (as cited in Klinger & Murray, 2012) who maintains that non-traditional students do not perform as well as their peers and Gale and Parker (2013) who suggest that the completion rates of non-traditional students are generally lower.

Some students, especially those from non-traditional pathways, may not be able to demonstrate particular behaviours expected in the study program without some form of scaffolding that makes the values and practices of their discipline clear and provides them “with the language, skills support, and opportunities they need to participate with growing competence in the new culture and its core activities” (Duff, 2010, p.76). The development of academic literacies should also be scaffolded so that students can meet the challenges of the classroom and be effective and productive participants in their study program, (Hammond & Gibbons, 2005; Ivanic, 1998; Macken-Horarik, Devereux, Trimmingham-Jack, & Wilson, 2006).

Furthermore, although a competent level of academic literacies is necessary for successful engagement and participation in the study program, the goal ultimately is for students to demonstrate their proficiency in the discourses of their discipline, first, during their professional placements and then in the workplace upon graduation. Ability to communicate both verbally and in written form is one of the core attributes listed in many universities’ graduate qualities. In a study carried out by the Collegiate Employment Research Institute, Michigan State University (2007), it was found that one of the reasons new graduates were either reprimanded or fired was their inability to effectively communicate both verbally and in writing. This finding was similar to another study conducted in the 1990s at the Johnson and Wales University. Similarly, in an investigation carried out by Graduate Careers Australia (2016), it was found that employers ranked interpersonal and communication skills (oral and written) as the topmost attribute they looked for in the selection criteria when recruiting graduates. What this highlights is that both academic literacies and professional communication are important skills that need to be scaffolded and developed in study programs so that students will be proficient in their discipline’s literacies.

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