

### Writing for Life: Transferability of Writing Knowledge and Practice

Cecile Badenhorst, Faculty of Education, Memorial University

#### Abstract

Many students struggle with writing in academic contexts. Even if they eventually do succeed in this context, they find that the writing requirements outside the university as difficult. ED 2700 Academic Literacies in Adult and Post-secondary Learning was developed to provide opportunities for students to understand the link between writing, context and knowledge. In this course, they begin to understand why writing practices are often hidden and implicit. The course is framed by an academic literacies approach, which argues that students need to explicitly acquire the literacies needed to be successful in post-secondary contexts, or in any context. Literacy in its broadest sense is about acquiring the epistemologies necessary for socialization in a particular discourse. Academic literacy encompasses a number of literacies: critical literacy, reading, writing, information literacy, visual literacy, graphic literacy, disciplinary knowledge and so on. These literacies are the social practices of a context that need to be made explicit if learners are to be successful. An academic literacies approach advocates that if students understand writing in context, as a social practice, they will be able to transfer this knowledge to any context.

**Key Words:** Academic writing; Academic literacies; University students; Writing as social practice; Higher education; Writing pedagogy

#### Introduction

Withington (2015) argues that academic English is a foreign language to most students who enter higher education. As they move from K-12 to university contexts, many students find writing in this 'foreign language' difficult. ED 2700, a course called *Academic Literacies in Adult and Post-Secondary Learning Contexts*, was designed and developed to introduce students to this new language and to unpack how academic ways of knowing are generated and defended through language, practices and texts. The course explores ways of making explicit these often implicit activities and it provides students with opportunities to understand different forms of writing-knowledge, and how 'texts' are developed, written, read and performed in university contexts. A key component of the course is to understand how writing is embedded in social practice. This is what makes writing knowledge difficult to transfer from one context to another. However, many students and instructors have deep-rooted beliefs that writing is a decontextualized skill that can be easily transferred from high school to university to work. While writing certainly has elements of skill that can be learned, it is also much more than this. My purpose in this presentation was to highlight the problem of transferability of writing knowledge and practice from one context to another and to disrupt notions of writing as only a decontextualized skill.

## Approaches to Writing

I started the presentation by focusing on approaches to writing. I used the terms 'approaches' and 'beliefs' about writing in the presentation because it was more accessible than 'discourses' a term which many participants may not have encountered before. I opened the presentation by asking participants to free-write either as a teacher or instructor. For this free-write the prompt was: *I believe student writing...* For those who were not teaching, they could free-write on this prompt: *For myself as a writer, I believe it's important to...* My instructions were: *Just write, don't think too much. We want stream-of-consciousness thoughts. Don't worry about spelling and grammar. You won't have to read it out if you don't want to, so write what you really feel.* Ideally, I would have liked participants to answer both questions but sequenced so that they would not see the second prompt until they had completed the first but I was cognizant of time constraints. I gave them the option to do either/or. My expectation was that they would write: *I believe student writing should be error-free, with carefully constructed sentences in correct grammar.* Or they might say: *I believe student writing should be interesting and creative.* For themselves as writers, I imagined they would say: *For myself as a writer, I believe it's important to write clearly or it's important to publish my research.* I did not ask participants to share what they wrote. It was my intention to raise at least one belief about writing to a conscious level while they listened to the rest of the presentation.

In the next two slides, I presented six writing discourses (approaches or beliefs):

1. Writing is a skill. There are skills of language that must be learned. Once learned the writer is competent in any context.
2. Writing is creative. Some people are born with talent to write and are naturally creative.
3. Writing is a product. Once I have done research, I write it up.
4. Writing is a process. Writing is tied to thinking and both take time to develop. I learn as I write.
5. Social forces position all writing and writers in relations of power. Writers need to develop critical awareness of how they are positioned in writing.
6. Writing happens for specific purposes within cultural contexts and these change over time.

## Writing Discourses

These discourses are adapted from Ivanič (2004) from her paper titled '*Discourses of writing and learning to write*'. In it she presents a meta-analysis of theory and research about writing and writing pedagogy and identifies six discourses or "configurations of beliefs and practices in relation to the teaching of writing" (p. 220). I adapted some of the titles of the discourses because I did not want to confuse participants with writing studies debates (process vs genre). I wanted those attending the presentation to be able to relate to the discourses. However, each of the discourses I presented are rooted in Ivanič's (2004) research. Essentially, Ivanič argues that as writers and educators, we are located in one of these discourses and this location affects what we believe about writing. Those beliefs affect not only how we write, but what we expect from students and how we assess them. As a caveat, Ivanič makes it clear that these discourses overlap and that there may be contradictions within discourses. I asked participants to think about what they had written in the first activity and to see if their approach to writing was reflected in these six discourses. I emphasized that there may be overlaps and that they may be drawing on several discourses; perhaps one for themselves as writers and one for their students. Again, I did not ask for responses but took the many nods as an indication that they could see their approaches in the list.

## Writing as a Skill

From the broad landscape of writing discourses, I honed into one particularly dominant discourse: *Writing as a skill*. I posed the problem that many students struggle with writing when they get to university, even if they did well at school. I told the story of how I ask my students to write literacy narratives where they describe their encounters with writing over their lifetime. A common narrative is of the student who does extremely well at writing at school and then comes to university and does poorly. They are often humiliated publicly, and feel shocked and ashamed at their lack of ability to write in the university context. They then develop life-time habits of struggling with writing. Why would someone who wrote well at school not be able to transfer those skills into the university classroom?

One of the most prevalent beliefs about writing is that *writing is skill*. This belief includes: *If it is a skill it is easily learned; and once learned, it is transferable to other contexts*. In other words, writing is a generic skill. What this really means is that “learning to write involves learning sound-symbol relationships and syntactic patterns” (Ivanič p. 225) which essentially means language structure and grammar. If writing is a skill, then it is simply learned in a workshop or two and these skills are straightforwardly transferred from one context to another. An academic literacies approach contests the belief that writing is a skill.

## Academic Literacies

*Academic literacies* is an approach to literacy in post-secondary contexts that emerged in the 1980s from the UK. During this time, post-secondary institutions in the UK went through a phase of expansion and more ‘non-traditional’ students were being accepted into universities. Non-traditional here means older students, part-time students, distance students, students who had dropped out of university at an earlier point, international students, students whose native language was not English. ‘Traditional’ generally refers to high achieving students from middle or upper socio-economic sectors who transitioned to university, full-time, straight from high school. Academic literacies, as an approach, developed from university educators who noticed that many students struggled to decode academic language and to understand what was required of them, specifically as it relates to academic writing. Writing tends to be the focus of an academic literacies approach because most assessment takes place through writing and that writing is the process through which many other literacies (reading, critical thinking, citing practices, etc.) are required (Russell et al., 2009).

Typically, ‘literacy’ is thought to mean knowing how to read and write but research shows how literacy is much more complex and that there are many ways of reading and writing and all these different reading and writing practices are literacies in themselves. As ground-breaking authors Shirley Brice Heath (1983) and Deborah Brandt (2001) have shown ‘literacy’ is constructed through economic, political and socio-cultural conditions. Heath argued that children are socialized into language and literacy practices, and how they are socialized affects their success in the schooling system. A key conclusion Brandt drew was that children from lower socio-economic groups in the US did not have literacy integrated into their lives in the same way that children from middle and upper class families do. In other words, even though the children from lower class families could read and write, the extent, range and complexity of what they could read and write was much less. She also showed that literacy skills contributed to economic and social stratification—the more literate you are, the more access you have to further education, funding for education and so on. From these studies, research has expanded to explore the complicated misalignments of cultures and discourses between home and school contexts (for example, Li, 2003; Pidgeon, 2008). In post-secondary contexts, researchers using an academic literacies approach suggest that for students to be successful, they need to be aware of and explicitly taught the many complex

literacies required in academic environments (Horner, 2013). This approach moves beyond 'skills' development because it locates literacies in specific social practices.

### **Shifting from 'Skills' to 'Literacies'**

Writing is embedded *social practice*. In other words, writing is situated within a specific context, like a classroom in a discipline. It is written for a purpose and an audience, it is culturally, historically and politically situated, and it contains power structures. While writing does have aspects of skills and is definitely creative, an academic literacies approach emphasizes that writing is made up of many literacies. What counts as 'good' writing depends on the place, time, purpose, audience (discipline), culture and who is in control of the writing situation. For example, if we focus on *purpose* in university contexts, the main purpose for writing could be assessment (exams) or to demonstrate knowledge (essays). Some writing might be administrative (letters). 'Good' writing in each of these examples is dependent on the context, purpose, who is reading it and what they will do with it.

### **Letter Writing**

In the presentation I gave the example of letter writing. I wanted to take the audience away from academic writing where the skills discourse is so deeply embedded that it is often hard to see and to illustrate with an example that might be more understandable to participants. Letter writing is a good example because it is easy to see how genres have changed even with a person's lifetime. Barton and Hall (2000) show the social significance of letter writing over time and how embedded it is in social practice. The meaning and significance of letter writing has changed as broader social practices have changed. At times, letter writing was a class-based practice where only a few could afford postage. At other times, letter writing has been at the centre of family relations and connections. Currently, letter writing has moved to the margins while texting and emailing have become more popular. But perhaps email messages are just another form of letter writing? The point here was to show that literacies respond to or are generated by social practice. We participate in these literacies as a part of our engagement in social, cultural and economic life.

### **Literacies in Academic Contexts**

In the same way that letter writing changes over time and place, so too does academic writing. Writing an essay for English is very different from writing one for History. Writing a Chemistry lab report is different from writing a Science research paper. With a dominant skills discourse that treats all writing as the same and writing skills as transferable, faculty do not teach the complex literacies required and students fail to adapt their writing practices. Any learning about writing that takes place does so implicitly and invisibly and students often do not understand why they did well or poorly. In addition, the social practice of writing in an academic context necessarily involves understanding *how we come to know*. Consequently, acquiring the necessary academic literacies is also about getting to know the epistemologies necessary for participating in a particular academic discourse. For example, students need to learn what knowledge is valued, what questions can be asked and who is allowed to ask while at the same time learning what they know and how to write what they know (Lea, 2004; Lea & Street, 1998; Lea & Street, 1999; Lea & Street, 2006; Street, 1984; 1995; 2005). Discourses and disciplines are complex and constantly shifting and the writer has to interpret and negotiate language, discursive practices and power relations among individuals in the institution while navigating their own multiple social identities. An academic literacies approach suggests that students should not merely be socialised into academic contexts and taught how to conform to existing cultures, it also advocates that students should be able to 'read' the discourse and then decide if they want to conform, transform or resist.

## Academic Literacies Pedagogy

There is a growing body of literature on the conceptual debates within this perspective, and new publications such as *Working with academic literacies* (Lillis, Harrington, Lea & Mitchell, 2015), is evidence of the intense research interest in this area. Recently the discussion has turned to the lack of research on pedagogy, and how an academic literacies approach could be included in post-secondary curricula (Gustafsson, 2011; Horner, 2013; Lillis & Scott, 2007; Thies et al., 2014). How would an academic literacies pedagogy work in practice? Could an academic literacies pedagogy enable learners to negotiate discourses but also make choices about their positioning? A key question, is: Is it possible to develop a pedagogy that enables learners to question a system while successfully negotiating that same system?

### ED 2700 Academic Literacies

At this point in the presentation I introduced ED 2700, an online undergraduate course I have recently developed and taught. The course objectives were to:

- introduce learners to the literacies of post-secondary learning contexts;
- examine the notion of discourse and how it impacts on understandings of knowledge;
- explore core components of academic discourse such as argument, evidence, critical thinking;
- analyse the literacy practices and ‘texts’ that are privileged in these contexts;
- make decisions and choices about participation in these practices.

The course contains several pedagogical arguments: First and foremost, that students need to be explicitly taught the literacies needed to be successful in academic contexts. Second, that literacy/ies is about understanding what counts as knowledge and how we come to know that knowledge in particular contexts. Finally, this understanding allows students to transfer their writing practices to different contexts. The content of the course covered:

- Rhetorical purpose (Discourse)
- Structural features (Genre)
- Language features (Genre)
- Discourse community (Audience)

If we take the ‘typical’ academic essay as an example, students would learn the *rhetorical purpose* (writing critically, making judgements about the value of ideas for the purpose of assessment in a particular discipline); the *structural (genre) features* (essays contain an introduction, middle and end, features an argument with evidence and citations); the *language features* (more formal tone, active voice is favoured these days, writing often includes transitions, etc.); and the presence of the *discourse community* (the audience, for example in Education, is often practitioner oriented). The audience decides whether the writing is ‘good’ based on what counts as knowledge and as evidence. The glue that holds all of this together and prevents it from becoming formulaic or generic is a constant thread that writing is embedded in cultural and political practices, that these practices change over time, that where you are in the hierarchy of power will affect how and what you write, and finally that you make choices when you write (e.g., How much to conform and how much to resist). Conforming or resistance to prevailing writing practices is a decision each writer makes with full knowledge of the consequences. Effectively students are not so much taught *how to write* as how to *read the discourse* and then adapt their writing practices as they see fit. They learn to ‘see’ the discourse through writer’s eyes and ask the question: How does this discipline want me to write? Once they know this, they can apply and adapt what they know about writing. Effectively, they can ‘write for life’. Students found the course (ED 2700) challenging since it contested their fundamental beliefs about writing. However, for many, what they

learned resonated with the struggles they had experienced, confirmed the implicit knowledge they had gained through experience and gave them a language to articulate some of their difficulties.

### **Why are Writing Beliefs so Important?**

If students are continually given the unspoken message that writing is a skill and once the skills of language are learned, they are easily transferable to other contexts, they will not be able to understand, for example, why they cannot transfer what they learned in an English essay to a History essay. Once in the workplace, they will be unable to switch to business writing practices because, effectively, they are still writing English essays. Assessment, from a skills approach, is often focused on correcting surface language errors. By taking an academic literacies approach, students shift into thinking that writing is a process where writing and thinking develops over time and within a context of other people and practices, which is all networked in relations of power. Assessment here focuses on the nature of the argument, the relationship of the evidence to the discourse community. Unfortunately, many university classrooms still teach writing as a skill and most times this is a message students receive implicitly. A recent Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (Garbati et al., 2015) report states that universities in Ontario are doing a poor job of addressing undergraduate writing skills, that writing pedagogy is often left to individual instructors who teach writing how they were taught often with generic tip sheets and that feedback most often focuses on error identification and checklists.

### **Conclusion**

At the beginning of the presentation, I presented six commonly held writing discourses (approaches or beliefs):

1. *Writing is a skill.* There are skills of language that must be learned. Once learned the writer is competent in any context.
2. *Writing is creative.* Some people are born with talent to write and are naturally creative.
3. *Writing is a product.* Once I have done research, I write it up.
4. *Writing is a process.* Writing is tied to thinking and both take time to develop. I learn as I write.
5. *Social forces position all writing* and writers in relations of power. Writers need to develop critical awareness of how they are positioned in writing.
6. *Writing happens for specific purposes* within cultural contexts and these change over time.

The last three discourses are encompassed in an academic literacies approach to writing. For most of the presentation I focused on disrupting *writing as a skill*. The main purpose of the presentation was to show how ED2700, which was developed from an academic literacies approach teaches students to 'read' a discourse and then be able to make decisions about writing. This approach enables transferability of writing from one context to another because students can see how writing is embedded in social practices. I suspected that many in the audience would not be aware of an academic literacies perspective and the body of literature that argues that literacy practices are often hidden in university contexts and they need to be exposed and taught explicitly to every student. I also thought that many in the audience would, perhaps unknowingly, submit to the prevailing skills myth in many university environments that somehow one should already know the literacies needed to be successful before one begins a post-secondary programme. To ensure that my message was heard, I decided to begin with beliefs about writing so that participants could see themselves as writers and teachers of writing first and they could begin to understand the pervasiveness of the skills myth. While I was gratified to see that a few members of the audience were familiar with academic literacies, comments on the conference evaluation forms indicated that this approach was, indeed, useful. One participant wrote: "The best thing about this session was reflecting on beliefs about writing and how shifting beliefs impact how I write and assign writing". Another commented: "The best thing... [was that it] introduced

me to many other ways of looking at writing”. Other comments included: “We were asked to question our own beliefs”, and “thought-provoking”. Participants also wanted more concrete, detailed activities to help students with their writing but unfortunately we did not have enough time to cover this in the session.

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## Author

**Cecile Badenhorst** is an Associate Professor in the Adult Education/Post-Secondary program at Memorial University. She has written: *Research Writing* (2007), *Dissertation Writing* (2008) and *Productive Writing* (2010) and co-edited: *Research literacies and writing pedagogies for Masters and Doctoral writers* (Brill, 2016) with Dr. Cally Guerin from the University of Adelaide. [cbadenhorst@mun.ca](mailto:cbadenhorst@mun.ca)