

CHAPTER 28

ACADEMIC LITERACIES AT THE INSTITUTIONAL INTERFACE: A PRICKLY CONVERSATION AROUND THORNY ISSUES

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SCENE ONE: AN EMAIL EXCHANGE

Graduate School Representative (GSR): I wonder if we could meet to have a chat about the somewhat thorny issue of PhD students getting their theses proofread.

Ac Lits Practitioner/Researcher (ALR): Yes, an extremely thorny issue. Main problem is usually what needs to happen isn't "proof-reading" as in the sense of proofing an article before sending off to publication. Most changes involve clarification of meaning with the original writer, hence time (and money).

SCENE TWO

Some weeks later, a face-to-face conversation takes place. At the request of the academic literacies practitioner/researcher, this was recorded:

ALR: Right, OK—so tell me from your perspective what the issues are.

GSR: OK ... This matter was raised as part of a supervisor workshop. One of the issues raised was about international students in particular having their theses proofread—um ... not so much on the basis that their English language isn't up to scratch, but more to do with the fact that the student is perfectly capable of writing and articulating their research and their research outcomes in their own language, but no matter how good their English is, may not quite get it right in English I was hoping that a way

forward might be to have a small panel of proofreading organizations, that we can say to students “we don’t recommend any one of these but pick from one of these, they understand what they can and can’t do in terms of correcting your work and making suggestions,” but then you start getting into where the boundaries are—and then I’m out of my comfort zone. So that’s kind of where I’m at, really, but still having the same sort of queries from a lot of people, can I have my thesis proofread.

ALR: At what stage are they asking for that?

GSR: Quite late on.

ALR: The final stages ... So, it’s a big job then?

GSR: Yeh.

ALR: And of course it probably doesn’t actually mean proofreading in the standard sense of proofreading—where you’re submitting an article for publication and you’re just making sure there isn’t a typo or the paragraphs start in the right place or whatever.

GSR: (somewhat uncomfortable intake of breath) mmmhh, well you see, I don’t know, you see, I would hope, perhaps naively, that it *would* be at that level, because if somebody’s about to submit, then there should be a confidence that they’re submitting something that’s worth examining and that is going to pass ...

ALR: Yeh, um, it is a terribly thorny issue. I mean I know because I’ve worked with a lot of PhD students across the college, and I found it was becoming such a ... I mean I wasn’t proofreading, I was trying to analyze their English and help them to formulate it so that they could actually say more clearly what it was they wanted to say—but that was with me reading the text, marking it up and then having one-to-ones with them ...

GSR: So quite close reading then really.

ALR: Yeh, because you can read a text and you can change it and it can mean all sorts of different things. And also, you can change one word and it can change the emphasis.

SGR: Absolutely ... and if you’re one step beyond that, they’ve got to sit and defend that thesis in front of examiners who may or may not be friendly and supportive, and who may or may not pass them, or who may pass them with 18 months corrections or

something.

ALR: So I think proofreading's the wrong term really. I suspect it's very seldom that proofreading's exactly what they require. They do require a lot more input It's a grey area. You have to say it's "all my own work"—well, is it all their own work? 'Cos the writing is quite an important part of the work.

SGR: It's tricky. I suppose ... I can't see the wood for the trees at the moment ...

I don't think there's going to be a straightforward answer, except to say that there is particular support for dyslexic students—and I wonder whether we can draw on that in some way ...

ALR: (audible deep breath) but that's a different type of support really. I mean, we run in-session language support classes for PhD students, and my worry is that these students haven't really made use of those ...

GSR: The more you think about it, the harder you try and deconstruct it—the harder it's got to put it together again—it almost feels like there's a PhD in there somewhere (joint laughter).

PROOFREADING: A THORN IN THE SIDE OF WRITING PEDAGOGY

While it was not explicitly stated in the above conversation, there seems to be an institutional expectation that the role of academic literacies practitioners is similar to that of proofreading, and that writing or language centres should either carry out or facilitate that role. This assumption is implied in Stephen North's 1984 proclamation, born of frustration, in a North American context, that: "[the writing centre] is a place for learning not a proofreading-shop-in-the-basement" (North, 1984). Similarly, Peter Spolc (1996), in an Australian context, discusses issues of responsibility when he finds that students expect writing specialists to offer proofreading services, a situation he describes wryly as "the skeleton in the academic skills closet." The continuing experience, internationally, of this assumption on the part of students has led to many writing and language centres explicitly making the negative statement on their websites or notice boards that they do not do proofreading. Discussions around what to do about the recurring institutional demand for proofreading also appear from time to time on mailbases such as BALEAP (the British Association of Lecturers in English for Academic Purposes) or EATAW (the European Association for the Teaching of Academic Writing). In these discus-

sions, it is the principles of learning and pedagogical practice that are highlighted in contrast to proofreading, which entails neither (see also, Joan Turner, 2011). One participant in a focus group on the topic of proofreading, conducted by the author with writing practitioners, asserted vigorously:

We should be working with students to highlight weak areas that need to be improved and giving them examples of how to improve it but we certainly shouldn't be going through crossing every "t" and dotting every "i," I absolutely don't think that is our job.

A HUMPTY DUMPTY EXPERIENCE

Given this rather fraught relationship between writing pedagogy, whatever the theoretical perspective, and proofreading, it may be seen as positive that the graduate school representative in the above conversation had prefaced her consultation on proofreading with the understanding that it was a "thorny" issue. This had not been her initial understanding, however. Rather she had come to see it as "thorny." In this respect, she has undergone a transformative learning experience, albeit one that leaves her somewhat "nettled." She has come to understand the difficulties of deciding "where the boundaries are" between proofreading and "making suggestions" for example. She gives the impression of having become increasingly exasperated by the fact that the simple solution, which "proofreading" appeared to present, has opened up more and more dilemmas. As she put it:

the more you think about it, the harder you try and deconstruct it—the harder it's got to put it together again.

This expression evokes the "Humpty Dumpty" nursery rhyme, in which, after he falls off a wall and breaks apart, "all the King's horses and all the King's men couldn't put Humpty together again." The sentiment underlines the difficulty of posing proofreading as a solution to thesis completion and submission. It also justifies the academic literacies critique of a "quick fix" approach to academic writing, discussed for example by Mary Lea & Brian Street (1998). The apparent "quick fix" has fragmented into a number of different "thorny" issues, which can no longer be re-integrated into a neat whole. Indeed, the "thorns" appear to accumulate rather than diminish. They include:

- establishing a boundary with the proof reader that includes spell checking and grammar checking but doesn't alter the content of the work;
- not removing or distorting the student's own voice;
- defending a thesis in a viva when the student hasn't had complete control over word choice;

- students must sign that a thesis is “all their own work,” but does using a proofreader alter that?

These are all problem areas that an academic literacies practitioner would instinctively be aware of, hence the professional disassociation of their role with that of proofreader. These issues also place the practice of proofreading in relation to student academic writing within an ethical framework. Similar ethical concerns were voiced by proofreaders themselves in research undertaken by Nigel Harwood and others at the University of Essex in the United Kingdom (Harwood et al., 2009, 2010).

MEANING AND MASKING MEANING

In Lewis Carroll’s (1871) *Through the Looking Glass*, Humpty Dumpty declares that words can mean anything he wants them to mean. In the above conversation, it is the academic literacies researcher who takes on the role of arbiter of the word “proofreading” and its meaning. She states:

Proofreading’s the wrong term.

In fact, the ideological role of the use of the term “proofreading” in higher education needs to be unmasked. When it is used in the context of students needing to improve their writing, or bring a PhD up to submission standard, it indexes an insipid and diluted view of what’s involved. It also risks denying those students who have put a great deal of effort into developing their writing and their English language proficiency, the educational importance of their achievement. At the same time, it masks deeper underlying issues of international higher education, and its multilingual student body, that institutions seem reluctant to address. For example, the institutional discourse around written English in higher education has not yet engaged with the wider debates circulating in relation to scholarly publication. These include the role of academic literacy brokers in the publication of L2 scholars (e.g., Christine Casanave 1998, John Flowerdew, 2000, Theresa Lillis & Mary Jane Curry, 2006, 2010); multilingualism in composition studies (e.g., Suresh Canagarajah, 2011; Christiane Donahue, 2009; Bruce Horner & John Trimbur, 2002) and the role of English as a Lingua Franca in English language teaching, where the acceptability of varying forms of English is promoted (e.g., Jennifer Jenkins, Alessia Cogo & Martin Dewey, 2011; Barbara Seidlhofer, 2005). It is incumbent upon an academic literacies perspective, which I have characterized as “an overarching framework, within which to embed a focus on the myriad processes and practices associated with reading and writing in contemporary higher education” (Turner, 2012, p. 2) to engage with these wider debates, and bring them into their practitioner, as well as institutional, discourse. The use of “proofreading” as a mechanistic solution to maintaining the status quo skates over all of these issues, and therefore needs to be resisted.

ENABLING THE TRANSFORMATIVE AT THE INSTITUTIONAL INTERFACE

One of the rationales for this edited collection is a focus on the relationship between academic literacies practices and their “transformative” potential. The notion of the “transformative” is a powerful one for higher education more widely, as can be seen for example in the following mission statement from my own university:

We offer a transformative experience, generating knowledge and stimulating self-discovery through creative, radical and intellectually rigorous thinking and practice.

The above context of the transformative relates to student experience, and the proposed changes to their consciousness and thinking patterns as individuals. In their work from an academic literacies perspective, Ivanič (1998) and Lillis (2001) chart this kind of transformative development, as well as detail the struggles the students have with institutional expectations. A transformative trajectory need not only be one where students adapt to institutional expectations, or where students (and practitioners) reach a higher stage of learning, or renewed sense of identity, but can also be one where institutional assumptions and practices change. The exigencies of international higher education highlight the need for such institutional change. Echoing the “ideological stance” (Theresa Lillis & Mary Scott, 2007), which focuses on the transformative rather than the normative in academic literacies practice, the relevance of the above conversation may be seen in its attempt to encourage the transformation of mechanistic perceptions of the work of academic writing, which the use of the word proofreading suggests.

There is no claim here, however, that any institutional transformation was achieved in the above conversation. It is nonetheless important to have such difficult conversations, to resist solutions such as proofreading, which it seems writing practitioners are adjudged to be able to provide, and at the same time, to keep the conversation going. One outcome of the above conversation was the suggestion of further conversations, ideally with the graduate school board, and a presentation at a future meeting was proposed.

The institutional interface, then, is an important site for academic literacies work and its transformative agenda. However, the route to transformation is strewn with prickly thorns, and not one easily signposted to “mission accomplished.”

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