

## REFLECTIONS 5

# REVISITING THE QUESTION OF TRANSFORMATION IN ACADEMIC LITERACIES: THE ETHNOGRAPHIC IMPERATIVE

### **Brian Street in conversation with Mary R. Lea and Theresa Lillis**

Brian Street is Professor Emeritus of Language in Education at King's College London and visiting Professor of Education in the Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania. His anthropological fieldwork on literacy in Iran during the 1970s and his theoretical work articulating an “ideological model” of literacy are foundational in literacy studies. Together with Mary R. Lea, he carried out ethnographic research on writing and reading practices in UK universities and their 1998 paper is highly cited and debated. In this extract from ongoing conversations, several of them recorded, Brian discusses with Mary and Theresa the impact of his disciplinary roots—anthropology—for studying literacy and his perspective on the transformational orientation of academic literacies research and practice.

**Theresa:** In reflecting on what academic literacies is, I think it's important to consider its strong ethnographic orientation. So I wonder if you can say something, Brian, about the importance of your own research and disciplinary background, in terms of anthropology and ethnography for developing this space—this particular approach to writing, reading and knowledge-making in the academy.

**Brian:** I think for me it emerged from having spent years working in New Literacy Studies which itself emerged from an anthropological perspective on language and literacy and in particular the idea of using ethnographic perspectives to try to understand what people are actually doing in reading and writing. In the dominant model—I work in development contexts, quite a lot, where the this model is very influential—the dominant view tends to be, “people are illiterate, what you need to do is pour literacy into them, and that once this is done other benefits will automatically happen—social, economic etc.” The ethnographic approach says, “Hang on, look and listen to what literacy practices they're already engaged in.” And very often, the response to that will be “they don't have any, they're illiterate, they're

stupid.” An ethnographic perspective forces you to suspend your own assumptions as to what counts as literacy and to listen to and observe what people are actually doing. So we’ve done a lot of that around the world in terms of the New Literacy Studies. It involves challenging what we refer to as the autonomous model of literacy, the assumption that literacy is just one uniform thing which happens everywhere, and instead adopting an ideological model, which states that the ways in which we understand reading and writing are always embedded in power relationships, ideologies, culture and meaning.

And that was the basis for looking inside our own systems, in universities and saying let’s apply these ideas here. The dominant perspective here is not unlike the developing world which is, “Here are these students arriving. Students can’t write”. Lots of people say, “Nothing to do with me. I’m a tutor, I teach geography, economics. Send them off and fix them.” Pour the literacy into them. And what we—Mary and I—began to develop—was an ethnographic perspective in the same way as we had done in international contexts. We said, “Let’s see what the students are bringing with them.” So one of the things that tells you is that firstly, students are coming with a variety of ways of addressing reading and writing. The second thing it tells you is that when they’re in the universities in courses, the ways in which they’re expected to read and write vary from one subject to another. The dominant model, the autonomous model says, literacy is literacy. When they arrive, if they can do it, fine, if not fix them. And the academic literacies’ view I think says there are multiple versions of this thing “academic literacy”—most obviously that the writing and the reading requirements of the different disciplines vary. An example I remember from my own discipline, anthropology, was interviewing an anthropologist at a university who had marked a student essay and had written in red ink down the side at the bottom, “You cannot write. Get down to the study skills centre.” And the student (we interviewed him as well) said, “I haven’t a clue what they’re talking about! My main major is history. I get good marks; my tutors think I can write. What’s all this about?” And that’s a classic example that what the disciplines expect is quite different. And it’s at the level not just of skill but of epistemology. So in history when this student wrote an essay, the assumption was that you had a sequence and the sequence was of time across periods which you then connected in terms of causal events—what happened in nineteenth century England, the corn laws may affect them then parliamentary moves in the late nineteenth century. In anthropology, anthropologists are very wary of that sequential kind of evolutionary move because that’s how very often people have seen *other* societies and anthropologists challenge this linear sequencing and say they don’t want a sequence from, for example, so called primitive through to intermediate modern to postmodern. What we want instead are, if you like, structural, post-structural accounts of social institutions, meanings and people’s *own models* of what goes on. And that’s a big

one, *people's own models*. So apply that to the different disciplines and the writing of the essay in anthropology, the epistemological, ideological, academic literacy perspective and assumptions are so different. And this student—and lots of students we encountered—have to learn to switch and very often their own tutors don't realize this because they're sitting in their own little edifice: the history guy sits here and anthropology there. And they say, "Nothing to do with me. I'm not a linguist I shouldn't have to teach academic literacy—they should know that already." What they don't necessarily recognize is that they are actually making epistemological, ideological literacy assumptions about what *they* think is a good essay—and the other tutor will have a different view. Students often recognize it slightly more—particularly if they're taking mixed degrees. You take business studies, you're doing economics one term, sociology another, business planning management another, and each of those will have their own conceptions as to what counts as thinking and what counts as writing. Now you know it sounds simple enough when I put it like that but actually, it does involve some kind of transformation of what counts as writing at university in the thinking and in the eyes of the tutors.

**Theresa:** So that kind of transformation is in terms of the tutors' own understandings of what's involved?

**Brian:** Yes and in fact that's one of the big issues. I taught a course at the University of Pennsylvania where we examined these issues with post graduate students and they began to unpick "hidden features" of academic writing (see Fischer this volume, chapter 5). They'd been told what the explicit features were you know, paragraphs, spelling, layout but there were also lots of hidden features—such as notions of tone, voice, and stance. Tutors implicitly used these hidden features to mark essays but they weren't made explicit. One point that this illustrates is that it's not just the students who need support—and if you like transformation—it's the tutors. And trying to take that idea into the universities and say, okay, you want to enhance the writing practices of students on degrees, so maybe it isn't enough just to address the students, maybe you also need to address the faculty and there you do come up against a block quite often (for further analysis and discussion, see also Tuck Chapter 14 and Roozen et al. Chapter 15 this volume).

**Theresa:** So, one goal of Academic Literacies drawing upon ethnography is to make visible the multiple literacies and the fact that in universities there are different practices, different rhetorical and epistemological practices associated with different disciplines. One pedagogical implication could be in terms of practice. That what tutors and students need to do is to make visible those conventions—as they currently exist—and to induct people into those practices. So to make visible, using whichever tools we have, and obviously there are strong traditions for doing this—like EAP, English for academic purposes and Contrastive Rhetoric—which have

worked hard to identify, label, make visible and teach key textual and rhetorical features. So I'm just wondering, from your perspective, is there a difference in terms of what academic literacies seeks to identify, make visible or engage with?

**Brian:** Maybe there are two levels. The first is what we can think of as the access level so Academic Literacies isn't rejecting study skills, socialization—the other models—it is recognizing that those are necessary parts of the process, if you like, of academic socialization. But in order to accomplish them you also need transformation at two levels: one is transformation at the level where the tutors themselves recognize that they actually have a contribution to make to the teaching and learning of writing. That writing isn't something separate. This is something that for example Sally Mitchell and colleagues have worked very hard at and is obviously a key goal in WAC and WID (see Russell and Mitchell this volume, Reflections 2). But the other level—and the bigger one—which became very obvious when working with mature students (I think some of your work dealt with this, Theresa) where you get people in midlife coming back to university who've been writing in many ways—maybe they've worked as nurses and had to write reports—and maybe now they've hit university and the tutor says “you can't write”. Gradually what comes out is the recognition that this is a different literacy practice and what you would hope is a kind of negotiation: the student saying “I'm not entirely convinced that the genre you're requiring for this discipline is actually the best way to go about it” and the tutor saying “I don't necessarily think that what you learnt in writing reports as a nurse is the same as what a degree requires which is reflexive critical, analytic writing.” What I would say is, *Okay let's negotiate that difference*. That's a transformation. That's a totally different ideological relationship between tutor and student and between discipline and professional practice. From a literacies—and academic literacies view—we'd say let's look more closely at what the students are bringing and look more closely at what the tutors are expecting, then let's talk about how the two can mesh together.

**Mary:** I agree and this was my starting point in the early 90s (Lea, 1994). Now, I'm thinking about this question and notion of transformation—what it is and the extent to which it is a goal or value of Academic literacies research and pedagogy. Where do you see “transformation” in relation to our 1998 article?

**Brian:** I don't think that you and I were directly concerned with issues of transformation in the article but we were concerned with issues of power in and around student writing and in taking a specific institutional perspective. Our interest was in power as process rather than structure and our aim was to make this process evident. We were definitely articulating what we might call a “change agenda,” which looking back on it now was quite strongly transformational—but maybe not quite in the Lillis and Scott (2007) sense.

There are probably always going to be tensions between the normative and transformative and how you actually instantiate what we called an academic literacies model in practice. In some ways, supporting people to access and engage in literacy practices that are valued, and ultimately powerful, may appear to be normative rather than transformative. So I think there are always going to be tensions between these perspectives. When we start looking at power it leads us to ask questions about who has control over resources, what counts as knowledge or how knowledge is articulated. I think both of us would say that it is issues of power that run through academic literacies' work in different contexts. That's where our key issues lay and this is what we were trying to tease out. Central to this, of course, was our institutional framing, which was not just about students and their writing. Maybe inevitably though—because the institutional lens is always on the student—it was that focus which got taken up and, of course, our three models were articulated around approaches to *student* writing.

**Mary:** Yes, I think our interest was as much with tutors and broader institutional practices as with students. One thing that happened was that in the interviews the tutors began to give us documents around writing as they talked about their practices. So we collected a vast range of unsolicited data, in terms of documentation, which foregrounded this institutional perspective. It was these documents, coupled with our observations within the different institutions, that made the institutional perspective so prominent.

**Brian:** Indeed. And our 1998 paper encompassed that institutional focus in the “academic literacies” approach, which we contrasted with “study skills” or “academic socialization.” Our intention here was to foreground aspects of practice which had significant implications for teacher-student interactions around writing. In that respect we argued that practice around student writing is always located in relations of power and authority and never reducible to sets of skills and competences necessary for success in the academy. In fact, we recognized then, and it has been made apparent in subsequent work, that we should not simply separate the three “models” with water tight boundaries. They are not discrete, and indeed aspects of each may be evident in the others.

**Mary:** An important point. I think one way of understanding that relationship is to take a specific example, like “genre conventions.” Traces of these are likely to be found in all three models in practice but what would be significant analytically is the way in which genre is being articulated, often implicitly, in different institutional contexts. “Study skills” can be identified through prescriptive attention to the formal linguistic features of genre conventions in generic models of academic writing, for example, “you shouldn’t use the first person.” “Academic socialization” could involve disciplinary specialists working with students to help them understand how to rec-

ognize specific disciplinary or subject based genres such as “writing about theory and practice in social work courses.” Issues of genre can also be approached through an academic literacies lens. Rather than focusing on genre features or what they look like—teaching genres—an academic literacies perspective is concerned with revealing how genres create knowledge in particular ways. Or as Fiona English argues, (see Chapter 17) what genres actually do. From an academic literacies perspective, this involves working with both students and their teachers to make visible the different ways in which particular genres shape knowledge and, ultimately offer students more control over them and over meaning making processes. In each instance genre is made visible. The contrasting ways in which this is being done in relation to each of the three approaches, study skills, academic socialization, academic literacies, signals difference in the relationships of power and authority between the participants involved and their engagement and control over meaning making resources. None of this can be decoupled from institutional decision making about where and how to locate work around writing and the values and beliefs which underpin this. What we pointed to in the 1998 paper was that the analytical lens offered by academic literacies research makes the workings of such institutional practice visible. So this picks up on the question Theresa asks previously—“Is there a difference in terms of what academic literacies seeks to identify, make visible or engage with?”

**Theresa:** Yes indeed. Thinking again about the dominant model of literacy that you were problematizing in the 1998 paper—I’m wondering whether you see such a model adversely affecting students from all social groups. I’m thinking about literacy and language, and thinking both locally within the United Kingdom and then globally—if we think of the position of English in academia, both in publishing but also in its increasing use as a medium for higher education. If there’s an ideological notion of a standard literacy/language doesn’t this have particular negative repercussions for groups of people from particular social classes—working class—or backgrounds—users of English as a second language etc.

**Brian:** Maybe it worked under imperialism—the idea that, “we’ll take this narrow standardized view of English and we’ll make that the standard for people moving up the system.” But this has never worked in actual communicative practice. For example, I was in Singapore at a project meeting where people were speaking versions of English and Hindi and Arabic; so what we actually ended up speaking around the table was a mix. At the same time, you can go into a UK classroom if the teacher is just trying to teach standard English; well these kids are coming from such mixed experience of everyday life that this standardized dominant model in southern England doesn’t bear much relation to the world they are actually living in. So it becomes rather isolated. You can use it for a while to set supposed standards, tick for this kind of accent and this grammar but once they go out into

jobs and start working, particularly international business it looks rather quaint and irrelevant and all the research shows that. I've more recently been working in Brazil where universities are expanding and you're seeing the usual statements and arguments, "Oh look, these nontraditional students, they can't write! Send them to the skills centre! What are we doing with them at university?"

An academic literacies view would say, hang on, slow down. Let's look more closely at what the students bring in. Then let's look at what the tutors are expecting. Then let's talk about how the two can mesh together. Let's negotiate this. And recognize that it will vary from one department to another, from one year to another, from one university to another. And that can create all kinds of resistance amongst those people who want to have some kind of uniform standard. That is a big issue that needs addressing. You can have uniform standards that are, so to say, monolingual/monoliterate, or you can have uniform standards that involve multilingual variety and diversity. So there's a communicative point here, do we want people to communicate? Or do we want them to be able to tick boxes to say they've met some obscure but rather irrelevant standard?

**Theresa:** You've both been working this area—both in terms of new literacies and academic literacies—for some considerable time in a whole range of contexts. Are there particular challenges or priorities you see for people working in this area, both in terms of research and in terms of practice. Are there things you think we really need to pay significant attention to?

**Mary:** My concern is just how intransigent the deficit model is—even when people are using the term "academic literacies" to describe what they do, in practice there still seems to be slippage into "fixing" particular groups of student. More recently I've been working on literacies and digital landscapes and the use of the term "digital literacy/ies" is fraught with similar problems. I think that wherever "literacies" is taken up across post-compulsory education there is a real danger that it loses its critical edge and becomes decoupled from fundamental issues of power and authority. The challenge for me is how we can regain "literacies" and all that the plural use signals in terms of contested practice.

**Brian:** One metaphor I'd use comes from the person from Algeria who was appointed to follow Kofi Annan as the UN representative in Syria. He said, "All I can see in front of me is a wall but I know that walls have cracks in them and that's what I'm going to work on." So that's what we're doing. Universities look like walls but there are some cracks. The main cracks are the number of students who are seen as failing, who drop out. And the phrase that tutors in this country use as much as anywhere is that "students cannot write." So let's address that head on and say, what does that mean? And what we can do about it? And an academic literacies

view I think can offer a much more constructive view than study skills, academic socialization, EAP—even some of the rhetoric in the United States which can get narrow—because academic literacies says “let’s question our assumptions about what counts and how we’ve arrived at it.” And it could be that by challenging our assumptions we can explain why large numbers of students who could otherwise do well are being thrown out of the system. So that’s the little gap in the wall I think that we might make our way through.

## REFERENCES

- Lea, M. R., & Street, B. (1998). Student writing in higher education: An academic literacies approach. *Studies in Higher Education*, 23, 157-172.
- Lillis, T., & Scott, M. (2007). Defining academic literacies research: Issues of epistemology, ideology and strategy. *Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 4(1), 5-32.
- Lea, M. R. (1994). “I thought I could write until I came here”: Student writing in higher education. In G. Gibbs (Ed.), *Improving student learning: Theory and practice*, 216-226. Oxford: Oxford Centre for Staff Development.