

CHAPTER 9

OPENING UP THE CURRICULUM: MOVING FROM THE NORMATIVE TO THE TRANSFORMATIVE IN TEACHERS' UNDERSTANDINGS OF DISCIPLINARY LITERACY PRACTICES

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This chapter covers what Theresa Lillis (2009) refers to as “living the normative, transformative space” through the experiences of a group of academics at a South African university of technology. Four dominant institutional discourses framed the way academic literacies were understood at the institution: “knowledge as something to be imparted, and the curriculum as a body of content to be learned”; “academic literacies as a list of skills (related to writing and reading and often studying) that could be taught separately in decontextualized ways and then transferred unproblematically to disciplines of study”; “academic literacy teaching as something that was needed by English Second Language students who were not proficient in English (the medium of instruction)”; and “the framing of students, particularly second language speakers of English, in a deficit mode.” These institutional discourses typically saw students as the “problem” and the reason for poor academic performance, while it also absolved lecturers from critically reflecting on their practice, and the institution from critically reflecting on its systems. These institutional discourses gave rise to dominant institutional practices such as academic literacy teaching through add-on, autonomous modules/subjects/courses, which were marginal to the mainstream curriculum. Referred to as “service subjects,” these courses were taught by academic literacy (language) lecturers who straddled academic departments, faculties and campuses, were itinerant and marginal to the day-to-day functioning of departments, and often hourly paid temporary appointments or contract positions. Given these institutional discourses and practices, alternative forms of responsiveness were explored through an academic literacies initiative with a deliberate shift of focus from students and their language proficiency to lecturers and their pedagogy. The purpose of this initiative was to challenge the above-mentioned institutional discourses by transforming academic

literacy teaching at the university *from* the prevailing separate, generic, skills-based courses taught by academic literacies lecturers, *to* an integrated approach where academic literacies (AL) and disciplinary lecturers worked collaboratively to integrate academic literacy teaching into various disciplines.

DESCRIPTION OF THE ACADEMIC LITERACIES INITIATIVE

The initiative, detailed elsewhere (Cecilia Jacobs, 2008), was implemented as a three-year institutional project that brought together ten partnerships between AL and disciplinary lecturers. The partnerships worked collaboratively on developing linguistically inclusive, integrated mainstream curricula. The emphasis was thus not on add-on approaches or “patching up” perceived language deficits but on engaging both AL and disciplinary lecturers in new ways of teaching disciplinary literacy practices, which I have termed “collaborative pedagogy.” These ten partnerships in turn formed a transdisciplinary collective of twenty academics, which was the institutional platform that networked the discipline-based partnerships between AL and disciplinary lecturers. The partnerships became the vehicle for integrating academic literacies into the respective disciplines by exploring the discursive practices of those disciplines, while the institutional project team provided a transdisciplinary space for those academics to explore their professional roles as tertiary educators. The collaborative processes, occurring in the ten partnerships as well as the transdisciplinary collective, appeared to enable the explicit teaching of disciplinary literacy practices through unlocking the tacit knowledge that the disciplinary lecturers had of these literacy practices.

So instead of AL lecturers teaching separate courses, they worked collaboratively with disciplinary lecturers on unpacking what the literacy practices of the discipline of study are (tacit knowledge for disciplinary lecturers) and then developing joint classroom activities to make these practices explicit to students. Some partnerships moved beyond just making these practices explicit and inducting students into the literacy practices of the discipline (the normative), to opening up curriculum spaces where the literacy practices of disciplines might be critiqued and contested by their students (the transformative). The partnerships also involved team teaching, where AL and disciplinary lecturers collaboratively taught in ways that embedded reading and writing within the ways that their particular academic disciplines used language in practice.

Without a roadmap for how this process might unfold, these partnerships engaged in collaborative teaching practices as a meaning-making exercise. It was through collaboratively planning their lessons, jointly developing the teaching materials, the actual practice of team teaching and then co-researching their practice that some of these lecturers developed alternative understandings and practices regarding academic literacies to those understandings and practices that had domi-

nated institutional discourses. This initiative was undertaken as an institutionally organized pedagogical project, and involved AL and disciplinary partnerships across a range of disciplines and academic departments, including science, radiography, architecture, mechanical engineering, electrical engineering, law, marketing, human resource management, business administration, and public administration. The initiative aimed to shift lecturers' "ways of thinking" about academic literacies from the "normative" towards the "transformative" (Theresa Lillis & Mary Scott, 2007).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMING

I have drawn on theoretical frameworks and empirical research from the broad field of academic literacies research (James Gee, 1990, 1998, 2003; Mary Lea & Barry Stierer, 2000; Mary Lea & Brian Street, 2006; Theresa Lillis, 2001, 2003; Brian Street, 1999, 2003). My work was informed by early theoretical models emanating from the New Literacy Studies, such as the "ideological and autonomous models" of literacy (Street, 1984), as well as more recent constructs emerging from the UK perspective on academic literacies research, such as the normative (identify and induct) and transformative (situate and contest) approaches to academic literacies research and practice (Lillis & Scott, 2007). Twenty years down the line, the autonomous model of literacy and normative approaches still appear to dominate understandings of academic literacies teaching at the institution where my research was located. This would suggest that there is a need for ongoing research into the practice of academic literacies teaching in higher education and the understandings that underpin these practices.

The literature suggests that a transformative pedagogy requires lecturers to move beyond the normative "academic socialization approach" which seeks to enculturate students into disciplinary literacy practices, to the teaching of Academic Literacies. A transformative pedagogy would require lecturers to open up curriculum spaces where the literacy practices of disciplines might be critiqued and contested. This chapter briefly reports on the findings from an initiative which engaged a group of partnered AL and disciplinary lecturers (from a range of disciplines) in collaborative teaching practices with a view to shifting from a normative towards a transformative pedagogy. The chapter will explore the range of understandings that these lecturers brought to their collaborative practices, and analyse how some of these understandings shifted over time.

I have used the three theoretical orientations to the teaching of academic literacies (skills, socialization and literacies), offered by Lea & Street (2006), as a tool for analyzing how participants in my study understood their teaching of academic literacies. The findings are drawn from an analysis of the transcripts of narrative interviews and focus group sessions, in which the twenty AL and disciplinary lecturers participated. My data revealed that all three of the orientations to the teaching

of academic literacies discussed in the conceptual framing above were evident in the understandings that these lecturers brought to their approach to the teaching of academic literacies, as I illustrate with some excerpts from my data set.

ACADEMIC SKILLS UNDERSTANDING

I can see they don't do well, maybe not because they don't know, it's because they can't express themselves. So I picked that up really, that it really is a language barrier, nothing else. Nothing else.

If students can't speak English properly then you must take students with a higher level of English. They must be put on support programmes to improve their language. What else do you want? I mean that's enough. The (institution) is doing that. It's doing enough. You don't need to do more.

These participants understood academic literacies teaching as being about promoting general language proficiency, enabling students to understand English as a medium of instruction and using grammatically correct English. This understanding is underpinned by the notion that the barrier to students' success in their disciplines of study is the medium of instruction, and this academic literacies pedagogy is firmly located within the autonomous, add-on support model. The classroom activities tended to focus on semantics and vocabulary, rather than on literacy practices. This understanding was expressed in teaching materials that made content knowledge accessible to students by simplifying the disciplinary language of authentic academic texts of the disciplines, including substituting technical terminology with common-sense terms wherever possible (see Street et al. Reflections 5 this volume).

ACADEMIC SOCIALIZATION UNDERSTANDING

Nowadays I would look at it much more in terms of the less tangible skills that you actually impart to your students which then helps them in the learning in the classroom, and helps them access the language. The glossary ... was very tangible, and crossword puzzles and annotating text and things like that. Whereas now, I think I'm far more open to how you get the students' pathways through learning, how to assert your subject, as well as learning the language of the subject and the language they need to write it academically. There's a whole underground layer, under learning, which depends upon it. Sort of a bedrock

layer of basic tools that allows the learner to access the different languages. And possibly, I think (at the start of the project) I was also still looking at language more in terms of medium of instruction.

This participant understood academic literacies teaching as being about uncritically inducting students into the literacy practices of the disciplines. However what is interesting in this excerpt is that she appears to have shifted in her thinking. She describes her initial understanding of academic literacies pedagogy as being about “tangible skills” and refers to classroom activities involving glossaries, crossword puzzles and annotated text. This would point to an academic skills understanding with a focus on language per se rather than practices. She then goes on to describe her emerging understanding of academic literacies pedagogy as involving “learning the language of the subject and the language they need to write it academically.” She then refers to a process of inducting her learners into the “basic tools” that allow the learner to access the disciplinary languages. This understanding was expressed in teaching materials that sought to make explicit to students the rules underpinning the literacy practices of her discipline.

ACADEMIC LITERACIES UNDERSTANDING

Initially one could have said you only need to know the words and the meanings to understand (the discipline) better. But you need to do more than that. What I’m saying is you need to be able to place the term where it comes from, what it means, what the implications are, how just one word changes the whole meaning, how language sets up relationships of power, how it sets up relationships of equality or inequality. So it’s getting deeper into conceptual understanding of these things. And I think it’s not only a matter of having certain language proficiency, it’s more than that It’s because words ultimately operate in a context, but it doesn’t only operate in the context of a passage or in the context of a book. It operates in the context of a reality, of a life; it operates in the context of your experience.

This participant understood academic literacies teaching as being about making visible for students the ways in which their discipline operated as a site of discourse and power. His pedagogy went beyond just giving students access to the workings of disciplinary discourses, to include how these discourses might be contested. This understanding was expressed in teaching materials that sought to make explicit the relationships of power within the discourses of the discipline and its literacy practices.

The participants in my study had worked in collaborative partnerships over a period of three years. Through their collaborative pedagogy they not only developed and shared understandings of academic literacies teaching, but also shifted from their initial understandings. These shifts seemed to move along a continuum of understandings, from an academic skills understanding at the outset (and some participants never managed to shift from this understanding), to an academic socialisation understanding (in the case of a number of the participants), to an academic literacies understanding (in a few cases).

I have found it useful in my data analysis to represent these shifts as points along a continuum of understandings of the teaching of academic literacies (see Figure 9.1).

There were many factors influencing why some partnerships were more successful in shifting than others, such as similar age, compatible personalities, shared life experiences, common educational vision, comparable levels of commitment, previous collaborative engagement, disciplinary expertise and disciplinary status (Jacobs, 2010). While one would expect that text-based disciplines would be more open to the academic literacies approach than disciplines that grant status to knowledge which is empirically constructed, this did not emerge in the data. This was partly because most disciplines at a university of technology are of the “empirically constructed” kind. Interestingly the disciplinary lecturers who shifted most towards the academic literacies approach were from the disciplines of architecture and radiography, neither of which would be regarded as text-based. For those partnerships who shifted from their initial understandings of academic literacies teaching, it was about both parties sharing their different perspectives about what it means to be literate in the discipline, with the AL lecturers bringing outsider knowledge of the teaching and learning of literacies, and the disciplinary lecturers bringing insider knowledge of the discursive practices of their particular disciplines. The following excerpts, from two different disciplinary lecturers, illustrate how the collaborative pedagogy led to shifts in their approaches and perspectives:

We needed someone from the outside to be able to see because once you are inside, you're the player, you don't see everything.



Figure 9.1: Continuum of understandings of the teaching of academic literacies.

But the person (AL lecturer), the spectator so to speak, can see the whole game as it were, and that perspective is important. Just to bring you back and say, “Look this is what I can see,” and maybe you can’t because you’re so focussed, you just see your own role and not how it fits into the broader picture.

Just working with a language person (AL lecturer) you suddenly realize that you’re veering way into the discipline, like talking out from the discipline rather than bringing people in with you, into it, that’s always sort of hard when you’re in something ... you’re very familiar with all these things and this other person can’t actually see it ... they can hear you but they really aren’t sure what you’re actually meaning. And it’s only when you move outside it like that, that is where I found the language person helped a lot ... the language lecturer saying to you, “Sorry, it is not really very clear at all,” that I found very, very helpful.

In both excerpts from the data the disciplinary lecturers describe themselves as insiders to the discipline who found it difficult to “see” explicitly the discursive practices of their disciplines and they describe the AL lecturers as having an outsider perspective which they found useful in helping them make explicit their tacit insider knowledge. This type of collaborative engagement, in the planning of their joint teaching materials and team taught lessons, led to pedagogies that sought to make this tacit knowledge explicit for their students.

DISCUSSION

How the participants in the study understood the teaching of academic literacies was linked to their collaborative pedagogy. In revealing the nature of disciplinary literacy practices and disciplines as sites of discourse and power, lecturers needed to make these often invisible processes explicit for students, and teach them the literacy “rules of the game.” Few of the partnerships reached this level of understanding, and this was evident in their jointly developed teaching materials and in the actual practice of their team-taught lessons. An example of teaching materials demonstrating this level of understanding is illustrated in Table 9.1:

Table 9.1 illustrates for students the progression of a professional term as it moves through different contexts, from the classroom (immobilization device) to practical demonstrations simulating the real world of radiography practice (impression and cast), to the clinical environment with real patients (mask). It demonstrates to students that in radiography practice there are specific forms of language usage for interacting with patients, for interacting with fellow professionals and for use in an academic environment. It also demonstrates that within the multi-

disciplinary team of professionals there are more formal terms (impression) and more informal terms (cast) used. The purpose of the pedagogy would be to make explicit to students not only which terms are suitable for which contexts, but also why. For example in the simulated clinical context it would be acceptable for fellow radiography students to use the informal term (cast) when talking to each other, but in communication between the practitioner and the students, it would be more acceptable to use the more formal term (impression). Although the environment remains the same here, the power differential invokes a more formal term in the latter case. So students learn the appropriate terms, as well as how these terms are used by different hierarchies of experts both within the discipline of radiography and its practice in the real world. This opens up a space in the curriculum where such hierarchies might be critiqued and contested.

Table 9.1 Progression of a professional term through different contexts

MASK	CAST	IMPRESSION	IMMOBILIZATION DEVICE
Layman’s term	Informal (jargon)	Formal (technical term)	Formal (academic term)
Patient	Colleagues	Colleagues	Presentation and writing
Real clinical context	Simulated clinical context		University context

Adapted from: Bridget Wyrley-Birch, 2010.

For lecturers to teach in this way, they needed to make the conceptual shift from a normative towards a transformative pedagogy. My research has shown that such shifts in the conceptualizations of lecturers was enhanced by a collaborative pedagogy, and it was in the doing (planning for and engaging in this collaborative pedagogy) that both the literacy and disciplinary lecturers were able to re-shape their “ways of thinking” about their literacy teaching practices, and ultimately transform their classroom practices. The “ways of doing” these collaborative partnerships involved the following:

- Collaborative development of teaching materials that attempted to make explicit for students the workings of their disciplinary discourses.
- Team teaching, where literacy and disciplinary lecturers shared the same classroom space.
- Joint design and assessment of tasks focussing on disciplinary literacy practices.
- Co-researching this “new” collaborative approach to the teaching of academic literacies.

The “ways of thinking” and the re-shaping of their conceptualizations of the teaching of academic literacies happened in the discursive spaces where this collab-

orative engagement took place (e.g., the workshops, the planning sessions for their team taught lessons, and in the process of designing their teaching materials and assessment tasks and in researching their practices). Through these activities they confronted issues of disciplinarity, transgressed their disciplinary boundaries, and in a process of shared meaning-making they came to understand what it meant to teach literacy as a social practice, reveal the rhetorical nature of texts and make explicit the ways in which disciplinary discourses function in powerful practices. The *outsider* position of the AL lecturer in relation to the discipline complemented the *insider* position of the disciplinary lecturer. The outsiders, through a process of interrogation and negotiation, helped shift the disciplinary lecturers to more explicit understandings of the workings of disciplinary discourses and the rules underpinning the literacy practices of their disciplines, and from this perspective they were better able to understand how to make this explicit for their novice students (Jacobs, 2007). This shift of perspective appeared to be a key factor in moving lecturers towards a transformative pedagogy. The collaborative engagement with an outsider enabled disciplinary lecturers to have some critical distance from the disciplinary discourses in which they were so immersed and in some cases this translated into transformative pedagogy which sought to go beyond simply identifying and inducting students into dominant disciplinary conventions, by making explicit in their teaching the contested nature of the knowledge shaping their disciplines. The collaborating partnerships drew on a range of pedagogical strategies which helped shift their teaching towards a more transformative pedagogy, such as developing learning materials which interrogate not only the words, symbols, diagrams and formulas through which their disciplines communicate meaning, but also the actions and practices underpinning these expressions of discourse; and using texts that demonstrate the practice of disciplines and illustrate how a discipline “reads and writes” itself in the real world.

The reality for most partnerships though, was that they taught within that grey area between the “normative” and “transformative,” as they shifted uneasily along a continuum of understandings (Figure 9.1), experiencing moments of “insider/outsiderness” (Theresa Lillis & Lucy Rai, 2011) in their collaborative engagement. While psycho-social and disciplinary factors influenced to some extent whether lecturers shifted or not, it was in the interplay of these factors and how they impacted on the balance of power within the collaborative partnerships that movement beyond the grey area between the “normative” and “transformative” occurred or did not. However, the process of bringing disciplinary lecturers’ tacit insider knowledge to more explicit awareness requires time for interrogation and negotiation between AL and disciplinary lecturers. When such time is not invested, these collaborations tend to have unproductive consequences and set up patterns of inequality. To maintain relationships based on equality, the collaborative space needs to be free of disciplinary alignment, and both AL and disciplinary lecturers need to occupy a

central position in the partnerships, with neither feeling peripheral to the process.

My findings seem to suggest that it was the process of shared meaning-making through collaborative engagement that facilitated movement towards transformative pedagogy. To sustain such collaborative engagement, institutions of higher education need to create discursive spaces where academic literacies and disciplinary lecturers could work across departmental and disciplinary boundaries. Such discursive spaces need to transcend the silo-nature of universities and address issues such as how to develop classroom materials that highlight the complex (often hidden) social practices that determine the principles and patterns through which disciplines communicate meaning, and then how to mediate such materials in a collaborative pedagogy.

A transformative pedagogy, which requires lecturers to move beyond simply identifying and inducting students into dominant disciplinary conventions, would require lecturers to open up curriculum spaces where the literacy practices of disciplines might be critiqued and contested. But in order to critique and contest such practices, lecturers would need to interrogate the “ways of knowing” in their disciplines, as well as the “modes” and “tools” that their disciplines draw on to create disciplinary ways of knowing. The insights from such interrogation then need to be translated into explicit pedagogy. This is the challenge confronting all academics and one in which academic developers, particularly AL practitioners, could play a more progressive role than they are currently playing in the context of higher education institutions in South Africa.

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