

# TEACHING ACADEMIC READING AS A DISCIPLINARY KNOWLEDGE PRACTICE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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## ABSTRACT

Many university lecturers expect students to be able to read disciplinary texts at the appropriate levels, and reflect critically and multidimensionally on those texts, yet are often frustrated by many students' lack of ability to do so satisfactorily. While there is much research to suggest that academic writing needs to be taught within the disciplines as a practice linked to disciplinary knowledge, there is less research to make the same claims about academic reading, which is often referred to, rather, as a 'skill'. This article argues for an overt focus on critical academic reading as part of disciplinary teaching and learning, and draws on a case study and lecturers' responses to questions on critical reading to show how an academic literacies and knowledge-focused approach can be useful to lecturers trying to help their students read in the disciplines.

**UNISA**   
university  
of south africa

South African Journal of Higher Education  
Volume 29 | Number 2 | 2015  
pp. 42–55

ISSN 1011-3487  
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**Keywords:** academic development, academic literacies, critical literacy, critical reading, disciplinary knowledge practices

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

At university the ability to read relevant texts critically, and analyse, synthesise and evaluate knowledge is a common requirement at all levels of study (Bharuthram 2012). University lecturers expect their students to read at a school-exit level, and to have some of the critical reading capacity required upon entering university. However, research suggests that many students entering higher education in South Africa, for example, are not able to read and write at school-exit level and therefore struggle to cope academically (Nel, Dreyer and Klopper 2004; Ngwenya 2010; Ralfe and Baxen 2012). For these students, reading academic texts presents a huge challenge and they may not complete prescribed readings despite the explicit requests from lecturers to read. Students who are unable to fully understand and interpret the texts they read are less able to complete tests, assignments and exams successfully, and are less likely to participate fully in class discussions, which can lead to feelings of alienation within teaching and learning environments, as well as increased dropout rates (McKenna 2004; Ngwenya 2010).

One response to students' poor levels of academic reading coupled with the additional pressure placed on lecturers to show evidence of student success is to provide students with detailed lecture notes. These notes do not necessarily encourage the reading of extended academic texts but rather more often encourage students to resort to more familiar practices such as rote learning and memorisation, which are generally praised in school where knowledge tends to be hegemonic rather than open to critique and interpretation (Boughy 2005; 2012). This problem is compounded by the fact that academic lecturers are not always able to explicitly articulate or openly explore the discursive practices of reading and meaning-making in their particular disciplines, as for many disciplinary experts these practices are 'commonsense' (Bharuthram and McKenna 2006) and not necessarily surfaced for reflection and critique. Hence, many lecturers rely on academic development (AD) type courses to teach reading, writing and thinking 'skills' and the mere existence of such courses tends to compound a sense that teaching 'content' or knowledge is the work of the disciplines, while teaching 'skills' is best left to AD practitioners or similar, thus perpetuating a view of academic literacies as separable from disciplinary knowledge practices.

In order to reverse the negative pattern around reading that is predominant in many higher education institutions in South Africa, this article suggests that the teaching of critical reading be embedded into disciplinary curricula and discourses in overt and practical ways. The reason is two-fold: first, what counts as 'critical' is often shaped by the disciplinary knowledge that students are reading about and the

field they are working within; and second, students will struggle to integrate what they are reading into their other academic activities if reading is taught as a discrete 'skill', rather than a disciplinary academic practice (see Geisler 2004; Lillis 2001). It is in this context that this article problematises issues related to the nature of reading at university and examines some of the potential ways to rethink 'teaching' reading in the disciplines.

The article begins with a discussion of the role of reading in developing academic literacies in higher education as well as reading critically in higher education. Then two connected sets of data are used to explore on the one hand, expectations of disciplinary lecturers as regards critical reading in the disciplines, and, on the other hand, the challenges experienced by an AD lecturer and students in making the transition from 'reading' to 'reading critically' and the need for greater collaboration between AD specialists and disciplinary lecturers. The article concludes this discussion by offering tentative starting points for thinking about teaching reading in different ways.

## THE ROLE OF READING IN BECOMING ACADEMICALLY LITERATE AT UNIVERSITY

There is much research and literature in higher education about academic writing and the complexities associated with teaching students how to write different academic texts (see Elton 2010; Ivanič 1998; Ivanič and Clark 1997; Krause 2001; Lillis 2001; Wingate 2012). While this article notes that academic writing as a process that creates tangible evidence of student achievement is a worthy focus of research and attention, it also cautions that equal attention needs to be paid to what students are writing about. In higher education, writing about something generally stems from reading about something, and the level at which one is reading determines the relevance and clarity of what one writes. Therefore, as students need to learn to write effectively, so they need to learn to read critically and comprehend the texts that they use as models for their own writing, and that serve as evidence and exposition in their own texts. Although it is often acknowledged that academic writing and reading go hand in hand, more time practically is spent on teaching writing while less time is devoted to helping students read, understand and interpret disciplinary texts in their disciplinary contexts.

Academic writing and reading are not generic skills: they are practices that are shaped and informed by the values and academic conventions of particular disciplines (Lillis 2001; Street 2004). These practices happen within, rather than outside these disciplines, and reading and writing serve to link existing knowledge with new knowledge to advance understanding of the field in which one is working (Boughey 2012). Academic reading, as a particular focus here, is part of a disciplinary 'Discourse' (that is, socially recognised ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, speaking, as well as reading and writing) to use Gee's term (2008). Through

the texts that lecturers prescribe for their students and draw on in designing curricula and assignments, they are communicating with students some of the central concepts and ideas that shape the disciplinary field. By reading these texts students are not only learning these concepts and ideas, they are also entering into a conversation within the Discourse of the discipline. They are learning, often tacitly, what counts as academic literacy in the discipline: the ways of thinking, reading, writing, valuing and also 'being' that are recognised and valued (Gee 2008). They are taking on an identity (McKenna 2004), becoming an historian, for example, or a lawyer. In Bernstein's (1999) terms, these students are acquiring a 'gaze'; a way of looking at knowledge and the world around them with a particular focus that will mark them as belonging to a particular Discourse community. As students read, write, think and debate about not only the knowledge in the disciplines, but also how the knowledge has been accumulated and produced in the field, they are being enculturated into this gaze. This gaze can be cultivated or trained through immersion in the Discourse community; through social and intellectual interaction over time with those who already possess it (Bernstein 1999).

The difficulty with this process of cultivating a gaze is that it is a largely tacit process and it takes time (Bernstein 1999). Students need to be part of a Discourse community for an extended period, and need to be trained in the methods of researching, understanding, producing and valuing knowledge before they fully acquire an appropriate gaze (Bernstein 1999). For students from home and school backgrounds that are congruent with university literacies and learning approaches, acquiring this gaze may not be as long and complex a process as for students whose home and school backgrounds are far less so (McKenna 2004). In South Africa, where so many students at university come from poorly resourced and less literate home and school environments, training students more overtly in the ways of being of disciplinary Discourses takes on even more significance. A closer look at academic reading as a vital part of acquiring a gaze and becoming a contributing member of a Discourse community highlights the important role that those who already have acquired this status have to play in enculturating students into those identities and Discourses.

## READING CRITICALLY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Critical reading requires readers to ask questions and probe texts; to be active in their reading by making meaning as they read rather than passively absorbing information (Cervetti, Pardales and Damico 2001). Cervetti et al. (2001) as well as McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004) argue that what is necessary in higher education is for students to develop 'critical literacy', which encompasses critical reading, but also requires students to adopt 'stances' in relation to the texts. This means that they need to learn to see the world from multiple perspectives, create alternative understandings of

texts, and be aware of multiple viewpoints surrounding texts as well as the power of images, words and texts (McLaughlin and DeVogd 2004). This is difficult for many students who have come from schools where reading is taught quite differently in terms of positioning students in relation to the texts. Geisler (2004), for example, argues that in schools and even early on in undergraduate education, reading is focused on making sense of content, rather than on realising that there are certain 'rhetorical processes' inherent in the way the text is structured and needs to be read. In other words, texts are doing something; they are persuading, arguing or justifying rather than just telling the reader about knowledge.

Geisler (2004) argues that if students are to become experts in their disciplines, they will need to learn not just how to make sense of the content they are reading, but learn in addition to master these rhetorical processes so that they not only know about knowledge, they also know how to construct, deconstruct and transform knowledge in their own writing and thinking. McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004, 53) echo this argument when they state that '[r]eading from a critical stance requires both the ability to think critically about – to analyze and evaluate – information sources ...; [to] meaningfully question their origin and purpose; and take action by representing alternative perspectives'. Further, Lesley (2001) argues that if we want students to succeed and become critically and relevantly literate, we need to give them authentic reading and writing opportunities that situate these practices within the contexts in which they are used and make sense. Critical reading is about recognising the ability for words to give voice to and to silence; it is about conscientisation rather than working out vocabulary (Lesley 2001), and thus is it vital for reading to be developed, guided and encouraged within the disciplines.

These are important understandings of what it means for students to be critically literate and what is necessary in terms of teaching in order to develop students' expertise and mastery over both the knowledge itself and the processes they need to use for them to know, transform and create new knowledge. However, while we acknowledge in higher education that these are worthy goals and that we need to help students reach them, we also need to acknowledge that, increasingly, universities in South Africa as well as those in the US and in the UK, for example, are admitting students from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds and from different nationalities who all bring different 'primary discourses' (Gee 1998) that is, ways of doing and being within the family with them into university. Often, the students' prior reading and related literacy experiences in these primary discourses are quite different, or even far removed from the secondary discourses into which they must be inducted at university (Gee 1998; Geisler 2004). When this is the case, students who need to make quite a big 'leap' from one way of reading and making sense into another, new and more demanding way, may struggle and become discouraged. If lecturers are not able to incorporate or focus on teaching students how to make sense of disciplinary knowledge encountered in prescribed texts and how to use prior knowledge to create

new knowledge, or develop critical literacies over time, students may struggle further to understand why they are reading certain texts as well as how to use these texts in their writing and other tasks. They may be learning the *what*, or the content of the disciplines, but not necessarily mastering enough of the *hows* or *whys* of disciplinary learning (see Geisler 2004).

## DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The data reflected on in this article comes from two separate but related projects. The first is from an English for Educational Development (EED) module offered to students in the Faculty of Community and Health Sciences (CHS) at a historically disadvantaged university in South Africa. The EED module was used as a case study during the period April 2008 to April 2012. The purpose of the EED module is to develop students' disciplinary literacies so that they can be more successful in their first year courses as well as in their subsequent studies at the University. In any given semester, a total of about 150 to 300 students register for the course. More specific data used for this research article focuses on two open-ended evaluative questions, which were completed by a total of 150 students in the first semester of 2011. The questions, 'What do you understand by "reading critically"?' and 'What are some of the things a critical reader does while reading a text?' were given to students prior to their lessons on critical reading in order to get a sense of their understanding of critical reading.

The second, related set of data is qualitative and provides some insight into what academic lecturers understand of critical reading, and what they do to help their students read. During the latter half of 2011 and the first quarter of 2012, a questionnaire consisting of two sets of questions was sent to 18 lecturers via email. These lecturers worked mostly with first and second year students and were sampled purposively from a range of disciplines including law, physics, politics and natural medicine. The first set of questions was: 'What does critical reading mean to you in your discipline, and in your teaching? What must students do to be reading critically?' The second was: 'How do you teach or support your students' reading practices in your teaching? If you do not, can you say why?' Of the 18 lecturers, 14 completed the questionnaire. Their responses were copied and pasted into a separate file, without the lecturers' names attached, so they were anonymised in this process.

The data received from the open-ended questions in both sets of data was collated by compiling an initial list of phrases that described responses. These responses were then categorised according to the list. This method of analysis is in keeping with the views of Hickman (1981, 345 in Arzipe 1994) who states that 'Analysis becomes a search for pattern, a striving for workable categories from which new perspectives emerge as the interpretation progresses'. In our analysis, we were looking, specifically, for data related to lecturers' and students' understanding of what critical reading is; connections between reading practices and ability and

disciplinary knowledge; students' approaches to reading; and lecturers' expectations of reading in their disciplines or courses.

The following section, rather than reporting on findings in a stricter sense, uses the data gathered from these two sources to facilitate a discussion regarding students' responses to a course aimed at developing their reading (and writing) ability and the ways in which lecturers view reading. The aim is to further this article's argument regarding the need to shift our understanding of reading from that of it being a more general academic skill that can be taught and learned outside the disciplines, to seeing reading as a knowledge-related practice that needs to be taught and learned within disciplines. The 'aboutness' of what is being read is an important consideration wherever students are being assisted with academic reading.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION PART ONE: WORKING WITH READING INSIDE THE DISCIPLINES

To focus on the lecturers first, some interesting insights emerged which are given here as an illustration of the ways in which reading is viewed and also supported from within the disciplines.

In response to the first question, a major theme that emerged from the lecturers' responses was the role of evaluating the author's argument, and whether or not the evidence is compelling and reasonable. One lecturer in particular highlighted that 'students need to learn to read "between the lines" and "behind the lines", i.e., what is implied without being said and what is absent'. This need for students to make their own evaluations of the arguments that they read is a common one, looking at the lecturers' responses. Students need to be able to form their own opinions based on their reading of the prescribed texts, and also use these readings to substantiate their opinions. Thus, they need to be able to understand 'the power of language to both silence and give voice to instances of oppression in issues of socially determined disparities' (Lesley 2001, 184).

These 'socially determined disparities' or whatever the issues are that students need to grapple with and form opinions about are going to be different for each discipline, and thus an approach to teaching reading that places emphasis on skills drilling (Lesley 2001) outside the contexts in which the knowledge is being used is quite likely to miss the mark in terms of doing what these lecturers are requiring. In essence, these lecturers are asking students to have a grasp of the Discourse (Gee 2008), not just the text. In another lecturer's words, 'critical reading means being able to read a text and not merely accepting it on face value but analyzing the ... words and sentences for *subtle* nuances, possible truths and falsehoods' (our emphasis). This notion of subtlety and reading 'behind' and 'between' the lines is a powerful one in the lecturers' responses, and highlights the role that those with the gaze, for whom the spaces behind and between the lines are readable and comprehensible,



have to play in ‘inviting students into the world of academic reading’ and knowing (Lesley 2001, 184).

For the questions asking how lecturers support their students’ reading, the responses were more diverse. Most of the lecturers commented that they set tasks that require students to practise the skills they must master, such as comparing and contrasting different opinions, arguments and viewpoints in the texts and reaching substantiated conclusions, and evaluating the relevance and persuasiveness of academic arguments in the texts, using their own understanding to contribute to class discussion. For example, one lecturer commented that an iterative approach is used, where ‘we start out with the basics – reading and summarizing and then progressively set tasks which involve critical reading and the evaluation of texts. An important component of this process is the role of ongoing feedback.’ Another commented that she usually includes ‘a reading exercise [at first year level] that would involve two readings representing contrasting theories .... Students are asked questions about the readings, e.g. which worldviews the authors hold .... Students are asked to contrast the assumptions that the authors make, etc.’

These lecturers are thus trying to make the development of discipline-appropriate academic literacies part and parcel of their teaching, although neither gave any detail about how the actual reading of the texts is supported. It seems to be left to the students to read and then come to class with enough comprehension to then be guided through relevant tasks, like comparing and contrasting and reading for the subtle nuances and implied meanings.

Another set of comments made in response to this question indicated that lecturers are skeptical about the ability of students to read critically in first year. One commented that

[i]n the first year ... the students have not generally grasped the skills yet, so they are seldom asked to critically read anything. In the first year, first semester course, there is primarily a need to get students to understand what they are reading. The critical bit comes later on.

Another said that ‘critical thinking for me means that ability to unpack a case study to get to the root of the issue or to analyse a piece of literature .... I feel that as a student you haven’t yet fully developed the ability to think critically yet.’ Both these lecturers indicated that they support their students’ reading by asking them to pre-read for classes, and one also indicated that she would ask students in her second year classes to read more critically because they would have learnt how to do that in a skills class that all second year students in her department have to take. A concern raised by these and similar responses in our data pool, and by Lesley (2001), is that if we come from a deficit approach, we are more likely to focus on a lack of things like the ability to think critically, or understand what is being read, and that this emphasis belies a focus on critical literacy and constrains approaches to teaching and learning. A possible response to these kinds of concerns about what students lack is, rather



than ‘drilling them in a series of disconnected sub skills in literacy’, to ‘give them complete, contextualized reading and writing experiences first and then work on skills through student-driven assessment and instruction’ (Lesley 2001, 184).

The responses from the lecturers indicate that the demands made of students in terms of working with disciplinary knowledge and its associated literacy practices are complex, and also not easily or quickly learnable. Returning to some of the claims made in the initial part of this article, we must also acknowledge the challenges faced in South African higher education, considering the poor exposure to reading instruction and practice that many students have before coming to university, and their struggles with text-based literacies at both school and university as well as documented differences between school and university literacy practices. It is as a result of these challenges in fostering disciplinary academic literacies that many AD-type courses do exist, to try and equip students with some of the relevant reading and writing abilities they will need to draw on in their disciplinary learning. The following section considers the insights from the data generated in the EED course.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION PART TWO: WORKING WITH READING OUTSIDE THE DISCIPLINES

The responses from the first question, ‘What do you understand by critical reading?’, provided interesting insights into students’ understanding of critical reading. The data showed that the majority of the students (approximately 80%) had a very narrow and limited view or no understanding at all of what critical reading means with many students equating it to the pre-reading strategy of ‘scanning’ a text. As an illustration, one student wrote, ‘I think critical reading is when you scan through the writing piece, noting what are the main ideas and theme of the text,’ and another wrote, ‘In my opinion, critical reading is being able to read rather quickly over a piece/scan the piece and being able to identify/pull out and take notes of the important facts and main points, i.e. get an overview of the entire text.’ There were some who did have a sense of what was expected: ‘Critical reading is when you read a text and you try and discover the deeper meaning of what is said behind the text. You will analyse what is written.’ This response is consistent with the lecturers’ expectations of students being able to read ‘behind’ and ‘between’ the lines and ‘not merely accept(ing) the text on face value’, but have the ability to analyse the deeper meaning of the text. However, the fact that so few students are able to read at this level is of concern.

Other students stated that critical reading requires paying attention to detail, however, their understanding of ‘detail’ did not refer to, for example, the context of the article or background of the author but rather on spelling and grammar as is evident in the following two student quotes: ‘My understanding of critical reading is that when reading a text one would pay attention to detail. You would be analyzing tense, language, punctuation, grammar, etc.,’ and ‘Critical reading is reading in

which the reader focusses on every detail in the text and tries to understand it fully. A critical reader looks at every word, spelling and punctuation in a specific text. A critical reader can be seen in the same way as an Editor of a magazine or newspaper.’

Clearly then, by the mere fact of not knowing what it means to read critically, these students could be seen as being less likely to achieve what the lecturers’ described as a critical approach to reading, and would perhaps be likely to be working with texts at a more descriptive or basic level. Such readers tend to view the texts they read as representing a kind of ‘truth’ and the author as the authority figure, and can therefore be hesitant to present their views on issues or contradict the author in any way. However, reading at university level requires students to actively engage with the texts they read and to be critical and questioning. Although in the lecturer data it was reported that the focus for some lecturers with first year students is getting them to first ‘understand what they are reading’, it must be noted that most lecturers, especially in the social sciences and humanities, do expect their students to know how to read critically in the sense of questioning what they read, or seeing what they read as one possible ‘truth’ out of a range of truths.

Hence, for these students a course like EED can be extremely beneficial in introducing them to the concept of critical reading in a more generic sense. However, it has been observed that while the EED-CHS course, through the use of disciplinary texts and a variety of reading tasks, does provide students with many of the tools they need to become ‘good’ readers as well as critical readers and writers, these interventions remain insufficient. Critical reading is a process that needs to be constantly reinforced over a period of time. Merely being a ‘good’ reader does not automatically make one a critical reader. Furthermore, while the EED course does begin the process of nudging students towards adopting a critical stance towards the texts they read, this process has to be sustained by disciplinary lecturers who, from an insider perspective and knowledge of their disciplines, should be helping students to understand how and why certain texts, concepts, methods and so on are used to critique and also make knowledge in their fields. Adopting a critical stance is a mentality, a way of thinking (Cervetti et al. 2001) and therefore courses such as EED should not be viewed as an ‘end all’ but as the start of a process that needs to be fostered within the disciplines.

Lecturers as disciplinary insiders should provide ample opportunities within their disciplinary subjects for students to practise and sustain their reading development and or even proceed towards becoming critical readers and thinkers since literacy is attained ‘by degrees’ (Taylor et al. 1988). Hence, disciplinary lecturers need to begin to assess their own assumptions about reading in their disciplines and then look at ways in which they can foster the culture of reading critically among their students, while also assisting students in taking on the identity of their disciplines. Disciplinary lecturers, with the insider knowledge they have, are in a better position to help shape their students’ reading practices by engaging them at a level that supersedes a literal

understanding of the text. As Lesley (2001) argues, we need to avoid ‘drilling’ students on reading as a skill or set of skills, and begin to give students more holistic introductions to reading in the context of the disciplines, and as a practice that allows them to join in the disciplinary conversations. Students’ ability with reading can be honed and developed through assessments and authentic tasks that demand and also support their literacy development over time.

Students’ responses to the second question, ‘What are some of the things a critical reader does while reading a text?’, were determined by their response to the first question. For example, the students who provided a good explanation of critical reading were also able to describe what a critical reader does. One student wrote:

Critical readers should examine the text to see if information is presented in a bias manner and to see if information presented is done in a particular manner for a reason. Critical readers must read between the lines to determine what the writer is attempting to convey with the text. A critical reader must critique and analyse the text.

In light of the reference in the lecturer data to the teaching of reading/critical reading being done in a ‘skills class’, it would seem that many lecturers, while acknowledging that reading is an important component in their courses, are perhaps reluctant or ill-equipped to take on the responsibility of making their disciplinary reading practices explicit by embedding critical reading and critical literacy as an overt part of their disciplinary teaching and learning. If academic and critical reading is not brought more explicitly into teaching and learning activities, and connected more obviously to disciplinary learning, whether through assessment, classroom activities or other means, this may have long-term implications for some students’ depth of immersion in disciplinary Discourses and for their acquisition of a disciplinary ‘gaze’.

Since disciplinary literacies are not a set of abstract principles (Gee 2008), every effort is made by the EED lecturers to provide students with authentic learning activities, for example, using discipline-specific assignment topics and related texts to teach students how to use the texts and write using them as required by their disciplines. However, despite these attempts, limited transfer of this reading and writing ability seems to take place between EED and their other degree courses, especially with students whose home literacy practices are very different from the university literacy practices. In a sense, this ‘lack of transfer’ is understandable since many students view EED (despite the use of disciplinary materials) as an *ad hoc* course and the academic literacy practices that they learn as separable from the knowledge presented to them by their disciplinary lecturers. It could also be that because of a lack of collaboration with lecturers in the faculty, what they learn in EED is not reinforced in recognisable or congruent ways in their other courses, and it may thus seem that what they learn in EED is not really valuable or relevant in clear ways. Tighter and more equal collaborative relationships between lecturers and academic development practitioners (see Jacobs 2007; 2010) can be very useful in

both exploring with lecturers their critical reading and writing needs and expectations, as well as the gaps between these and what students are able to achieve, and putting in place measures and initiatives to create space in the curriculum and the classroom for academic literacy teaching and development.

## CONCLUSION

In attempting to join a conversation about the role of critical, academic reading in building academic literacies in the disciplines, this article has argued that reading needs to be approached as a disciplinary practice linked to knowledge-building rather than as a discrete skill. An academic literacies approach taken by this article has indicated the ways in which knowledge in the disciplines shapes the ways in which texts are written, and therefore how they need to be read. In coming to university and joining a discipline, such as Law for example, students are not just learning ‘things’; they are joining Discourse communities, and they are learning to speak, read, write, think and ‘be’ like the members of these communities. They are, in other words, taking on an identity, and this comes with a ‘gaze’ or a way of seeing, interpreting and responding to the world. Acquiring this identity and this gaze is vital to students’ success, not only at university but also in the professional worlds they will enter after graduation.

That there are often too few conversations by disciplinary lecturers with their students about what reading in their disciplines entails is a cause for concern. Academic reading is a complex process and each discipline has its own ‘norms and conventions’ and, as such, disciplinary lecturers have their own expectations of reading in their disciplines, which must be made as explicit and ‘learnable’ as possible. By teaching students to take disciplinary approaches to the texts they read – for example, to understand the contexts in which the research or knowledge being reported on has been generated and its place in terms of the topics being studied or the wider debates in the field, as well as the content of the particular texts being read – students can begin to think critically in the ways that they are required to, and this can also translate into improved academic writing. They can begin to move beyond seeing texts as just imparting information that needs to be learnt, and can begin to see different authors and texts as part of wider conversations about knowledge that they are becoming involved in too. They can be taught to understand the information as well as the rhetorical processes (Geisler 2004) used to write about it. It is therefore paramount that disciplinary lecturers begin to reassess their roles in relation to teaching their students how to read the disciplinary texts.

In addition, there is a need for a wider institutional approach to student reading. This article has argued that being proficient and capable readers is a central part of acquiring disciplinary identities, and becoming comfortable with them as well as able to communicate effectively in recognisable ways with other members of

these communities. It is through disciplinary texts – books, journal articles, papers, conference presentations – that knowledge in different disciplines is created and disseminated, challenged and cumulatively acquired. These are the conversations that students need to join. While there are challenges to developing students' academic reading capacity, particularly in contexts where students from impoverished home and school environments are entering universities under-prepared for this level of study in certain ways, this article has argued that being a proficient reader is not only about being versed in the medium of instruction; it is about being given access to disciplinary conversations about knowledge, and acquiring tools to join those conversations, as well as time and support in mastering them over the course of an undergraduate, or postgraduate, degree programme. Lecturers and academic development practitioners both have valuable roles to play in creating opportunities for students to acquire and master these critical literacies, but through working collaboratively rather than in separated spaces.

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