Acquiring a new Discourse:

Using action research and sociocultural pedagogies to explore how a study group is able to support mature-aged open entry students in their first semesters at university

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Abstract

This research explores how a study group concurrent with mature-aged open-entry students' first semesters on the campus of a research university could support those students as they acquired an academic Discourse. It addresses a gap in both research and practice for such students who very often arrive at university without academic preparation and must find support for their transitions through generic provisions rather than from interventions designed for their own particular needs based on the findings of focused research. Many of these students struggle to engage with the ways of being and doing within higher education, particularly with its expectations for teaching and learning, its worldviews, specialised language, and approaches to writing.

This study used action research to develop and trial an intervention informed by Gee's concept of Discourse incorporating a sociocultural pedagogy. As writing is a core component of an academic Discourse, pedagogy also incorporated a scaffolded genre approach to teaching writing. In line with action research, the intervention was continually modified in response to emerging data which were gathered primarily from participant observation and transcripts of study group meetings, the researcher's reflective journal, participant interviews, and student texts.

Findings suggest that while a study group does not replace academic preparation, it may provide something necessary and complementary for mature-aged students. The group provided a space in which many participants were able to identify expectations for teaching and learning they held and, through the reflection that was a core of the action research process, adapt those to something more appropriate for an academic Discourse. In the study group, students learned and practised specific writing process skills they did not have on entry which they then applied in their writing beyond the bounds of the group. Students also began to recognise themselves as legitimate participants in higher education.

This study concludes with the implication that transition for mature-aged students is a holistic process of acquiring a new Discourse by immersion in a social grouping. A study group such as the one in this research may provide an opportunity for acquiring a new Discourse.

Acknowledgments

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