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Perceptions and Anticipation of Academic Literacy: 'Finding Your Own Voice'

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Abstract

Based on data gathered via survey questionnaire and follow up in-class discussion, the paper explores the ways undergraduate students think of themselves as writers and readers. Data drawn from a pilot survey in 2007 and a second in 2009 provides the impetus for discussion of issues of literacy and identity in a digital world. Of interest is 1) what first-year students anticipate they need to do and know, and 2) how final-year students reflect on what they have learnt in terms of academic literacies and related skills. A key issue is the way students bring a particular identity as readers and writers to university, and how this is transformed and re-inscribed through their studies. The importance of teaching for the development of rhetorical dexterity in a digital environment is highlighted because students' digital literacy is a core element in their literacy identity. The paper also asks 'how far should educators go in working into the space of digital literacies?'

Introduction

When students enter the university and travel through it, they are bound to a particularly systematic version of being literate – an 'orderliness' of literacy as required in a 'severe' institution, says Brophy (2003: 27). There is a tension here with what he terms 'the vast anarchic archive of the literate'; literacy, he contends, is one of the tools by which we satisfy 'our desire [...] for the unpredictable – the aleatory – the shocking, the reactive, the inventive' (2003: 27). This tension is further complicated by the possibilities enabled by the digital technologies that underpin the literacy practices of our students. Ulmer has labelled these practices 'electracy' (Ulmer 2003). Rather than simply electronic literacy, there is a dimension here of the capacity to use image and print to make meaning and to construct identity. This is literacy that is dictated by a digital medium in which entertainment and celebrity impact on how individual identities are formed.¹ For how we communicate and interact with the world near and far is increasingly dominated by electronic text. As Richard Lanham says:

We have an expressive field, which has created new 'spaces between words' and filled them with image and sound. We have available to us, once again after all these centuries, 'an alphabet that thinks' (Lanham 2007: 130).

Consequently, there is a change to the rhetorics of the way knowledge is distributed. The digital medium, he avers,

creates a different rhetoric that puts words, written and spoken, in new juxtapositions with picture and sound. It creates a dynamic, three-dimensional space in which traditional academic disciplines take on new relationships and in which conceptual thought undergoes a

¹ Rice (2006) following Ulmer's lead, opines that the concept of electracy should be added to the concept of literacy because celebrity culture is today as significant in determining sense of self and positioning oneself in the world as family, work and school. (Rice 2006:105)

radical dramatization and design emerges as a central organizational principle (Lanham 2007: 248).

If Lanham is right, such literacy practices help create an individual's literacy archive, which includes the many kinds of literacy practices in which students are already engaged at home and at work. Teachers need to be aware of students' literacy practices in 'other domains of their lives' and of the boundaries that might be crossed fruitfully in the development of the literacies of higher and further education, suggest Ivanic and Satchwell (2007: 101). The literacy of orderliness promulgated within the university context is very different from the literacy practices in which students operate: via the social media of Facebook, MySpace, blogs and a myriad of Internet sites, computer games, or via SMS and mobile telephony and the new texting behaviours.²

These new spaces for words, Lanham asserts, 'will require a new conception of rhetoric, a new doctrine for teaching expression in an electronic attention economy' (2007: 142). Arroyo draws on Ulmer and his proposal for a rhetoric of electracry in echoing his suggestion that today's students are in effect inventing the future of writing (Arroyo 2005: 695). This is social/popular literacy for this century. Revisiting Richard Hoggart's agenda-setting text *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), Hartley explores the implications for education of 'popular literacy [...] led by consumer-created digital content' (Hartley 2009: 17). He suggests that 'commercial culture may be outpacing formal schooling in promoting creative digital literacy via entrepreneurial and distributed learning' (Hartley 2009: 18). 'It may be', Hartley says, 'that those in need of a creative makeover are not teenagers but teachers' (2009: 18) who need to find a way to work with students who are the 'wired youth' of the information age (Mesch and Talmud 2010).

Universities attempt to play catch up with digital technologies. Yet the university context – despite its offering of podcasts of lectures, on-line resources, electronic assignment submission and return, assessments tracked and annotated on essays and research papers, and the opportunity to present multimodal assignments – is essentially the 'severe' institution in its expectations of academic literacy. It is at the intersection of student practices and our roles as teachers in higher education that we focus our attention in this paper.

Students' Perceptions of their Literacy

In 2007, we conducted a small pilot in-class survey of students in the Writing and Creative Communication major in a Liberal Arts degree – including fourth-year (Honours research) students.³ (Students also take sub-majors and minors in other disciplines.) The survey responses and follow-up in-class discussions raised some of the issues presaged in the opening paragraphs of this paper: student perceptions of the requirements for writing and reading at university; the skills they believe they bring with them on their university journey; their versions of themselves as literate individuals at the beginning and at the conclusion of their time at university; and the place of digital literacy activities in their lives. It gives us an opportunity to ask, 'If the University experience contributes to each student's literacy archive, how and what does it contribute?' And how far should teachers of writing work with digital media as part of teaching academic literacies?⁴

²Alexander reports on a survey showing that U.S. undergraduates spent six hours per week reading material on the web, and that more than half those surveyed spent four hours or more playing computer games (Alexander 2009: 36). This figure for digital interaction by students would seem conservative when one considers the use of mobile/cell phones and linked digital technologies.

³The questionnaire was modelled initially on that developed by Donahue at the Université de Lille for her students in literature, writing and education courses (see Donahue 2008, for a discussion of the results of her survey). As an in-class activity, it was conducted according to university ethics procedures.

⁴Issues such as those noted here are the focus of a project generated by a group of international researchers to explore the issues of transition into university study. The main question posed by the Antwerp Group (as we have dubbed ourselves after the place where the first forays into the project occurred) is, 'What characterises the literacy experiences of students as they make the transition from one educational context to another?' Scholars from University of South Australia, M.I.T, University of North Carolina, Dartmouth College, University de Lille 3 and Institute of Education, London, are

The results from the 2007 pilot survey and discussion revealed that the group of 30 first-year students seemed to have a reading/writing diet focussing on celebrity magazines (print and on-line); Facebook and MySpace websites; email; text messaging; and computer games. Ulmer's concept of 'electracy' seems a relevant descriptor for our students' literacy activities. These students expressed confidence in writing for personal everyday activities and for social purposes and some confidence in writing creatively for minor university tasks. The second-year students, more attuned to the 'severe literacies' of the academic context, expressed their culture shock at dealing with university reading in the Writing major and in other disciplines. They were relatively confident of themselves as writers but expressed a need to develop reading skills to support their writing for academic purposes, including for research and report writing as well as for standard academic essays (see Woods 2008).

In 2009, we adjusted the survey questionnaire and also included additional questions specifically about student understanding of research practice.⁵ We offered it to 28 first-year students and a combined group of 24 third-year and fourth-year (Honours by thesis) students with follow-up in-class discussions.⁶ The students in the survey had been at university from anywhere between one month and four or more years (for some mature-age, part-time students).⁷ The survey was again conducted as a paper-based, in-class activity, followed by free-ranging discussion, designed to allow students to reflect on their own literacy practices.

Findings and Discussion

Question 1 in the 2009 survey was simply, 'What kinds of writing do/did you expect to do at university?' We are interested in the students' expectations for themselves as writers and whether they have a sense of the range of writing required in the various disciplines in which they were enrolled.

First-year students generally indicate that they expect to be doing a lot of creative writing and writing of narratives. They also anticipate writing critical essays and reports; one student noted, 'Similar to high school, just a higher standard' and another, 'solid academic writing', which 'fits into the expectations of the lecturer', said another.⁸ The third- and fourth-years were more precise in listing their expectations: reports, prose, poetry, speeches, academic essays, critical analyses in response to reading, technical writing, theoretical writing, notes and reflections. They have been at university for at least two years and are familiar with the range of written forms students normally encounter across academic disciplines.

Question 2 specifically asked, 'What additional writing did/do you expect to do in this program?' Student comments focussed again on the anticipation of writing creatively rather than what one student labelled as 'normal academic writing'. Several noted however that they were finding that rhetorical analysis of texts (a feature of the first subject) was unexpected but that they 'enjoy analysing the texts'. The third- and fourth-years now understand that they will be applying theoretical perspectives to their work and to the work of other writers. They expect to develop the technical skills to develop their writing, and perhaps to publish in academic journals.

involved in the project. See Donahue (2009) for an illuminating discussion of the parameters of internationalising research and the discourse of composition/writing. Each of the researchers has developed a mode of investigation that seems best suited to their local context. Joint presentations at international conferences have allowed the group to continue the discussion about issues – local, national, international and cultural – in terms of how we understand the needs, challenges and constraints of our students.

⁵ The survey asks questions about reading habits and skills, reading choices, research practices and understandings. This paper does not deal with these data in detail.

⁶ The survey cohorts are small and thus statistically not meaningful since they are classes of 20–30 students each. However our purpose is to use the survey and the follow-up discussions as a way of monitoring our students' perceptions of themselves as writers and readers, as literate individuals and to engage them in reflecting on their own literacy practices.

⁷ First Year class (including three second year students) – 25 responses; Third Years – 20; and Honours by thesis – four students.

⁸ Quotations are from the student responses in the survey data.

Transferable Skills

We wanted to find out what writing skills the students believed they had ready to transfer to academic study, so question 3 asked, 'What writing skills did you bring with you to university?' In general the first-year class confidently listed their skills in writing creatively: 'imagination, creative and descriptive skills'; 'a strong sense of creative writing'; 'seeing things objectively'; 'a creative and sometimes distinctive writing style'; 'my creativity; a good grasp of the English Language'; 'a sound grasp of grammar and structure in certain forms of writing'. One asserts:

I've been told I have a conversational style of writing. I don't know whether that is good or bad. People tend to compliment me on my writing so I'd like to think that I'm an alright all-round writer.

Another acknowledges some limitations: 'I am good at creative writing but need to work more on analytical and critical writing'.

The third- and fourth-year students acknowledge a range of skills, not only those used at university but also those drawn from the workplace, as several of them are working part-time or are slightly older students making a career change. Thus they are familiar with and clearly acknowledge the experience of writing workplace reports, funding submissions, documents and other professional communications. One described him/herself as 'a creative professional'. Another noted that he/she 'brought a creative mind' as well as the skills developed in writing for a fashion blog and for a fashion college newsletter.

Of interest to us in the responses to these questions, which deal with background and expectations, is that none of the students noted their skills in writing in the digital environment – there is only one mention of writing a blog. Their focus is on their desire to write creatively and on the anticipation that academic disciplinary work would require essays – analytical and critical – and writing of a higher standard than they had previously done. In general the first-year students did not acknowledge the full range of writing forms to be encountered at university, while third- and fourth-years listed the broad range – which they of course had already encountered. Noting this, we pose the question for those of us teaching new university students, 'How important might it be that students are given a taste of a broad range of writing in their first writing and communication courses, and should the range of writing forms be made explicit early in their university studies?'

As it is, students encounter new forms of writing almost unannounced subject by subject, as a gradually accumulating basket of forms (an academic 'literacy archive') with which they become familiar as if by osmosis. Rarely is the specificity of all the forms to come made explicit so that they might anticipate the range they might need to master. Is there a case for deliberately exploring Writing/Written Communication as a discrete topic as part of early engagement for student writers? Perhaps there is merit in drawing students' attention to the social patterning of written communication systems and announcing early in their student life, the range of writing they will be expected to master over the next three to four years.⁹

Anticipating Skills Needed

Are students themselves able to indicate what it is they need to learn? To get at this, question 4 asked, 'What do you think you need to know about writing at University?' Already in five weeks the first-year students begin to realise the specific skills they need to be successful as writers in an academic context. They note for example, 'style and formatting requirements'; 'tone expected'; 'referencing'; 'planning an essay and locating key points'; 'being able to think'; 'using formal academic language'; 'writing to a higher standard than high school'; 'the many forms and ways of writing'. One student notes succinctly, she/he needs to know 'how to use an academic voice as well as the ability to use correct punctuation, grammar and formatting'. Another points out that writing at university is 'professional and strict. There is a lot to learn'. It is the shock of the new in terms of 'structures of

⁹ See the proposal by Downes and Wardle (2007) and responses by Kutney (2007) and Miles *et al.* (2008), for a discussion of this idea.

texts, large vocabulary, punctuation, grammatical terms, referencing and citation' that leads one student to say that he/she needs to know 'everything' about writing at university. A refrain in several survey forms is the awareness of the need to 'write to university standards'.

Third- and fourth-years are more precise in listing the skills they need to develop or are currently exercising. They do not mention university standards, instead they write of 'understanding the subtleties between different academic writing forms'; 'adapting to new terminology'; 'being specific and accountable in supporting claims, structure, argument, audience, and grasping theoretical perspectives'. One student opined, 'I think it is important to know all aspects of writing from professional to creative and the techniques and styles involved in such writing'. Another pointed out that, 'you need to understand a topic thoroughly before writing can begin to incorporate your own voice'. There is a confidence here, even while acknowledging what they need to learn; these final-year students know what is expected and acknowledge what they do not know.

Digital Literacy Practices

Question 5 asked specifically about writing online, and much of the in-class discussion was also devoted to this because we were particularly interested to pursue how students perceived their activities in the digital informal environment in relation to their academic work. The first-years self-define as belonging to either *The Simpsons and Spice Girls Generation* (born pre-1995) or to *The Digital Generation* (post 1995). Hartley says these Generation Y or 'digital natives' 'do not see computers as technology' (2009:104). Rather, 'It is as if they have developed an innate ability for text-messaging, iPodding, gaming, multitasking on multiple platforms' (Hartley 2009: 105). They are the 'net-worked generation' for which 'digital and mobile orientation is [more] "embodied" in their taken-for-granted reality' (Mesch and Talmud 2010: 146).

Some of the third- and fourth-year students as mature-age students are clearly in neither category but are nevertheless engaged in the digital environment. Students across all years list their various online literacy activities (including a full range of social media such as Facebook). They clearly make a distinction between the kinds of writing necessary for different purposes, as one student comments:

Mostly I write using social interactive websites such as Facebook in which my writing is much more casual and informal. I use short words a lot. However when writing emails to lecturers I tend to use good English, full sentences and grammar.

Students simply treat the literacies required for handling mobiles/cellphones and digital social media for what they are: communication practices for everyday life and thus intimately connected to each individual who is linked into 'an integrated electronic system of communication and entertainment' (Mesch and Talmud 2010: 2). Students engage in creative self-expression and communication and adapt to the demands of new technologies without thinking and without the need for instruction. Such 21st Century writing practice, says Yancey,

marks the beginning of a new era of literacy, a period we might call the Age of Composition, a period where composers become composers not through direct and formal instruction alone (if at all) but rather through what we might call an extracurricular social co-apprenticeship (Yancey 2009: 5).

Educators Respond

Because digital literacy is now consumer-led, following the 'demand-side model' rather than the 'supply-side model' of literacy activity of the past (Hartley 2009: 21), it poses questions and challenges for educators. Schools and universities, says Hartley, have not 'been adept at enabling demand-driven and distributed learning networks for imaginative rather than instrumental purposes' (2009: 105). Just how far then, should educators go, in working into the space of digital literacies?

The NCTE report directed at 21st Century literacies asserts that teachers should build bridges between school and the reading and writing practices required outside school walls – and specifically

teach the use of digital technologies for more formal activities (such as ‘creating and understanding texts’), not just for entertainment (NCTE 2009: 4). The report acknowledges that students do not consider their constant use of literacy in the digital environment as ‘writing’ and ‘reading’ and that they see ‘little correlation between writing that one does for academic purposes and everyday literacy practices outside of school’ (NCTE 2009:4).

We suggest that the relationship is more complex than oppositional or even about ‘separate’ activities. Students understand the differences; they know well what their literacy activities in their social and community contexts are all about. It is as if they are operating with a different discourse ‘register’, one prompted by the technologies available. The NCTE report asserts that ‘we are missing an opportunity’ if we do not seek to understand and teach into ‘the gap between formal and informal writing’ required in everyday life (NCTE, 2009: 4). In tune with this, Yancey (like Lanham (2007) and Ulmer (2003)) calls for a new model of composing and curriculum which includes multimedia, visuals, images, text messaging, web-browsing, and which acknowledges the complementarity of the literacy development of print, digital and networked literacy practices (2009: 6).

Yet, when we review what our students have to say, it appears that what they look to in their university education would seem to be something other than to be deliberately engaged in learning activities that specifically target their digital environment and its technologies. They are entirely comfortable in their use of digital literacies, that is, the ‘form of hands-on productive expression taught by and within the milieu in which it is deployed, using multi-platform devices to “write” as well as “read” electronic media’ (Hartley 2009: 21). What they are seeking is the specifics of writing with purpose to convey information, ideas and concepts, to read analytically and critically, to use their reading to argue a case or prepare a report, to sift and sort primary and secondary data and make sense of it; to write in a range of forms accurately and appropriately. They want to be ethnographers of any situation, particularly if they have to use the writing/representational codes specific to that context.

Academic Literacy and Identity

Teachers should perhaps recognise that they do not need to engage completely with the informal social world of the digital environment in which students comfortably operate. Instead, we should acknowledge that context but offer something different for students who are suddenly confronted with Brophy’s particular ‘orderliness of literacy’ in the ‘severe institution’ (Brophy 2003: 27). What is challenged is their sense of identity – perhaps formed comfortably and sustained in both their digital environment and in their previous school environment in informal or formal ways. Our reading of the responses to questions which deal specifically with what they see as most difficult in terms of writing at university provides us with a way of thinking about their sense of themselves as writers and their awareness of the change process in which they are immersed.

Early on in their academic careers, students tend to develop a sense of loss regarding their writing. There is a certain loss of control: ‘In previous years I have been able to (partly) control the writing I have done and I am not very good at writing articles that include facts and quotes’ writes a first year. Told, perhaps, by tutors that they are being ‘too creative’ in their essays, their reaction can be that ‘everything becomes recycled, outdated and said a million times before’, or that they are ‘not being allowed to come up with new arguments’. The perceived pressure to refrain from subjectivity in their analytical writing and to adopt a more objective stance, both stylistically and methodologically, leaves them feeling that they must somehow ‘de-inscribe’ the ‘self’ in the process.

Clearly, this sense of self is something they associate with creativity and innovation on the one hand, while on the other it represents the chief focus of those non- or extra-academic activities already mentioned and which students regard not so much as ‘writing’ as their day-to-day acts of functional and social communication. The self in this context can be seen as both subject and object: it is the agent of expression and the topic being expressed. Students’ induction into academic writing therefore appears to involve a process of self-denial by which they learn ‘to separate “science” (description and argumentation) and “popular culture” (self-expression and communication) further from one another’ (Hartley 2009: 69).

As their academic careers progress, however, students usually come to understand that what they have to say individually on a topic might be valued. Certainly responses by our third-year students such as ‘you need to understand a topic thoroughly before writing [...] to incorporate your own voice’, and that a chief difficulty in writing at university is ‘Originality – it usually takes me a while to come up with [...] a fresh or interesting angle’, suggest that the earlier pressures to de-inscribe the self have been supplanted by demands to re-inscribe it. By the third year, students’ perceptions are that they will have found the confidence to reassert their own opinions and offer their personal interpretations, supported of course by ‘objective’ and ‘authoritative’ resource material.

Conclusion

The survey data and in-class discussions with first-, third- and fourth-year students give us confidence that the positive pedagogical models offered by Curry (2007), Ivanic and Satchwell (2007) and the recently released *Framework of Success in Post-Secondary Writing* with its focus on ‘habits of mind and experience’ (NCTE 2011), are right for the ‘New Times’ (Luke and Elkins 1998).¹⁰ For, when students ‘move across the landscape of college courses’ or move from university to professional contexts as writers, ‘proficiency is not simply mapping a discrete set of learned skills onto new tasks in unfamiliar contexts; it requires [a] kind of rhetorical, discursive and textual flexibility and sensitivity’ in the programs they encounter at university (Anson 2008: 114).

The writing program in which our students immerse themselves aims to offer them an experience of rhetoric as textual practice, in which the range of writing and reading tasks they are assigned, provides a pathway into literacies – multiliteracies – using whatever technologies are at hand. The survey data gives us confidence that students are aware of themselves as writers and readers and that they have the confidence to use their existing formal academic literacy skills, as well as their informal social networking digital literacy skills, to meet the challenges of the requirements of academic, and indeed, professional contexts. The survey and in-class discussions suggest that they do not regard gaps in their skills and knowledge of academic requirements as ‘problematic’ but rather as a hurdle to be cleared.

Perhaps it is their ready acceptance of the constant changes in the digital technologies and the fact they take these in their stride as an essential component of their social context, which gives them the confidence that they can acquire new skills to meet the challenges. They sense a loss of the self early in their academic life at university but gradually they assume the confidence to re-build their identity and sense of writing/reading self. They are the creative agents in the world of digital communication and they do not expect universities to take hold of their world and incorporate it into the academic domain. Rather, they are prepared to act on the academic world and draw their skills into it, as long as curriculum practices (including assessment tasks) provide the opportunity. Such practices emerge when teachers are prepared to be ‘creative educators’ who focus on developing ‘life’ skills rather than on ‘literacy’, digital or otherwise (Hartley 2009: 32–34).

¹⁰ ‘New Times’ is still a useful catch phrase even though coined in 1998, for when are times not new?

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