Theorising tertiary writing instruction: Accounting for the process, post-process, genre and critical literacies approaches

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This discussion of theories of writing instruction arises from the context of teaching research writing to postgraduate students for whom English is an additional language. However, given the present diversity of the student body in all tertiary writing courses (as a result of the democratization and internationalization of higher education), it is argued that a principled evaluation of theories of writing instruction that places the academic literacy needs of the student writer as central is relevant to the wider field of tertiary writing instruction. As a basis for this review discussion, the paper proposes that student writers need to develop their knowledge and skills in three areas: *discourse competence*; *identity and voice* (within a specific academic community) and *critical competence*, and that the development of these three areas of writer competence is loosely sequential. The paper reviews four different theories of writing instruction in terms of their capacity to advance these areas of writer knowledge and skills; they are the *process writing*, *post-process*, *genre-based* and *critical literacies* approaches. The paper argues that a critical understanding of these theories and the ways in which they underpin currently available materials and teacher practice is essential if teachers are to be able to provide a well-argued rationale for the assumptions, knowledge, skills and ideologies that underpin their courses.

1. Introduction

Although there is an extensive literature dealing with the theories of writing instruction, this brief review focuses on their capacity to underpin frameworks (curricular and pedagogical) that assist students to progress from student to competent writers within the particular academic discourse community of which they are "bidding for membership" (Widdowson, 1998, p. 10). As indicated in the abstract, it is proposed that the key stages in the development of student writers are:

- developing knowledge frameworks in order to be able to deconstruct and reconstruct the discourses of the discipline that they aim to enter;
- developing an authorial 'voice' and an 'identity' within their target discourse community; and,
- developing a critical competence to innovate, challenge, resist and reshape the discourses of their own academic community.

These developmental stages are not the stages of an academic writing course; they are the stages of the successful launch of an academic or professional career. Indeed the tertiary writing course, because it tends to be brief and transitory, will probably only relate to the first developmental stage, but it should help to establish the basis for those following by assisting writers to acquire the tools and frameworks that they need to become *discourse analysts* (Johns, 1997) and writers in their chosen disciplines.

Before examining some of these key theoretical approaches in relation to their potential to assist the academic writer in their development, it is instructive to contextualise them within the research traditions from which they arise.

Process (and *post-process*) approaches to the teaching of writing derive from the North American writing and rhetoric tradition (including *composition theory*). This is an academic community with a long history, a large membership and its own distinctive organs of communication, such as the *College Composition and Communication* journal and *College English*. This tradition tends to employ a humanities approach to scholarship and research, has a variety of genres for the communication of ideas, including the research essay, and tends to use the MLA referencing system.

On the other hand, *genre-based* approaches to the teaching of writing, such as in mainstream schooling and second language teaching (found mainly outside of North America), have emerged from the fields of systemic functional linguistics, discourse analysis and educational studies. Research in this tradition, therefore, tends to select from the range of approaches, styles and methods available to social science research, and is communicated through the genre of the research article, using the APA approach to the physical organisation of text and referencing.

The *critical literacy* approach derives from theories of the relationship between the exercise of and response to power (Foucault, 1977, 1980) and the obstacles to learners posed by power structures in education (Freire, 1979, 1994). Critical literacies approaches have questioned both the basis of pedagogy, including the assumptions and practices of writing instructors as well as the object of the pedagogy, such as the extent to which instructor-trained writers will perpetuate rather than resist and shape the writing practices of their future disciplines.

Thus, the different theoretical perspectives on writing instruction arise from different educational or theoretical traditions that employ differing approaches, styles and methods in research. However, in the current environment of scholarship and research related to writing, there is an increasing need to cross borders and draw upon the theories and practices of different scholarly traditions in order to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student body. In this paper, rather than discuss these different theories of writing pedagogy in terms of oppositional binaries (e.g., process vs. genre-based approaches), they are considered in terms of their potential to develop the previously-mentioned, three key knowledge and skills areas of student writers.

2. Development of the capacity to deconstruct and reconstruct disciplinary discourses

Within the various models that aim to account for *communicative competence* (see, for example, Council of Europe, 2001), a concept that refers to an individual's overall knowledge of and capacity to use a language, there have been various proposals for the component competence of *discourse competence.* This refers to a language user's ability to process and create extended texts (spoken or written) that are the appropriate, competent and coherent linguistic traces of discourse processes. Discourse competence is more than textual competence as it involves socially constructed knowledge, general rhetorical knowledge and linguistic knowledge and also, to intermesh these knowledge areas within discourse, it requires more abstract procedural or organisational knowledge (Bruce, 2005, 2008a, 2008b).

In order for student writers to develop a discourse competence, it is proposed here that, following the approach of Johns (1997, 2001), they need to be trained as discourse analysts. They need to develop heuristic processes and knowledge frameworks to analyse and deconstruct the texts (and related discourses) of their subject areas in order to be able to construct their own texts competently. Therefore, the first criterion for the review of theories of writing instruction applicable to tertiary contexts is their capacity to support a methodology

that enables the student writer to develop their discourse competence within a discipline-specific setting.

Consideration of the use of language in specific domains (such as within an academic community) has not been integral to the various interpretations of the 'process approach' to writing instruction, an approach centrally concerned with applying the knowledge of cognitive processes engaged in by writers in order to develop self-awareness and self-confidence in exercising the writing skill (Flower & Hayes, 1981; Elbow, 1981; Emig, 1971; Murray, 1982). In the process approach, the object of writing is a focus on issues of personal relevance and interest to the writer. Language-related knowledge and skills are addressed on a 'need-to-know' basis in relation to the writer's own self-expression, and in an inductive way through conferencing, often at the stage of editing a draft text.

Post-process theorists moved from a focus on the writer's cognitive self to consideration of the social situation and construction of writing and, in some cases from the perspective of external ideological positionings, such as, for example, a feminist position. The *social situatedness* of writing was reflected in the classroom with tasks and activities that reflected social constructivism (Lave & Wenger, 1991), and collaborative learning (Bruffee, 1993). Thus post-process theory, in moving from a focus simply on the writer considered the *sociologics* of writing including its interactive character. However, in post-process theories the writer and the social activities that surrounded the writer were not linked in any systematic way to features of language in specific domains or contexts. In keeping with the post-process notion of social situatedness of writing, North American (New Rhetoric) genre theorists (Devitt, 2004; Freedman & Medway, 1994; Miller, 1984) considered genres (as categorisers of texts) by focusing on the social actions that surround texts but not than their realisations as texts. Linguistic analysis of genres as categories of texts, such as within specific disciplinary domains, is seen as "prescriptivism and [an] implicit static vision of genre" (Freedman & Medway, 1994, p. 9).

On the other hand, approaches to genres (as categories of texts) that have attempted link the construction of meaning in a social context to the actual language of texts have been proposed by genre theorists influenced by *systemic functional linguistics* (Eggins, 1994; Hasan, 1985/989; Martin, 1986, 1992, 1997, 2000; Ventola, 1985) and those working in the field of *English for Specific / Specifiable Purposes* (hereafter ESP) (Dudley-Evans, 1986, 1989, 1994; Swales, 1981, 1990, 1998, 2002; Bhatia 1993, 1998, 2004; Johns, 1997, 2001). Of the two, it is the latter (hereafter ESP) approach from which has arisen a considerable body of theory and research relating to the analysis and teaching of genres relating to specific academic disciplines. The aim of this stream of genre research has been to inform academic writing courses for students for whom English is an additional language. The theoretical basis for the ESP approach to genre analysis is pragmatic and developing, so that it now accounts for both ethnographic and textual knowledge (Bhatia, 2004; Swales, 1998) as well as propositional and metadiscoursal knowledge (Hyland, 2005). A developing body of work on genre pedagogy has also addressed the charge of prescriptivism in the implementation of genre-based courses (see Badger & White, 2000; Hyland, 2003).

Writers who are aspirant members of academic discipline need to access discourses and written texts of those disciplines. Within the limited time frames of tertiary writing courses, it would seem that a well-theorised, genre-based approach may potentially provide access to this type of knowledge. However, an adequate theory of genre needs to be able to account for the socially constructed, general rhetorical and linguistic elements of texts (Bruce, 2008a). Furthermore, the incorporation of genre knowledge in pedagogy requires a learner-centred methodology that employ cycles of learning that involve both analysis and synthesis (Skehan, 1996) where students are involved in deconstructing (actively and critically) and reconstructing the particular genres of their discipline.

3. Development of writer voice and identity

Among the theories of writing pedagogy, the notion of writers developing a *voice* in order to be able to communicate their own ideas in individuated and innovative ways is generally seen as an essential element of competence. In relation to the idea of 'voice', the process approach introduced the notion of writer-centredness to language classrooms, moving away from authoritarian teaching roles and a sole focus on linguistic knowledge. Learner writers were encouraged to harness cognitive principles of thinking, generating and organising ideas, and using recursive strategies for encoding their ideas into written texts. However, as previously mentioned, process approaches take no account of the external factors of contextual knowledge and context-related communicative purposes and forms and how these elements ultimately shape the communications of interactions within specific contexts.

Communicating in one's own voice through writing (within the context of an academic community) would appear to relate closely to reading and processing the written texts of the same discipline. Therefore, many writing instructors see that the skill of writing cannot be taught in isolation without reference to reading. Hirvela (2004) proposes *reader response theory* as a basis for connecting reading and writing in the context of instructing non native-speakers in writing. Reader response theory privileges a reader's, individualised response to a text, which inevitably would be based on their personal frameworks of prior knowledge, life experience, cognitive training and previous experience of texts. While these types of personal knowledge may well provide a valid basis for processing and responding to everyday and literary texts, the approach would appear to be less suitable as a basis for processing and responding to discipline-specific academic texts. Rather, the requirements for deriving appropriate discourses from academic texts would admit less breadth of validity to a range of personal interpretations of the text, and require a greater understanding of the socially-constructed knowledge and communicative values and practices of the discourse community within which the text is located, including what Widdowson (2004) refers to the 'pretextual' values of specialist readers.

> Our understanding of a text, its realization as discourse, depends on the degree to which we can ratify the linguistic and contextual knowledge that its author presumes we share. This has to do with how far we can engage with the text at all. But there is a second condition that also comes into play: this has to do with what we are processing the text for, what we want to get out of it, the pretextual purpose which controls the nature of the engagement, and which regulates our focus of attention. (Widdowson, 2004, p. 80)

Thus, in an academic context, it seems that the development of a 'writer voice' may not be merely an individualised voice based on a heightened self-awareness of personal thinking and information processing and organising skills. It is an identity and a voice established and grounded within a particularly disciplinary discourse community, and it communicates by drawing upon the identities, genres and communicative values of that community.

Thus, it is still feasible that the development of a disciplinary voice and identity in writing would be closely connected to reading; however, it will be reading that involves processing and analysing disciplinary genres (categories of texts). It is proposed here that this will involve a focus on two closely related areas of genre knowledge are involved in the development of voice; these are epistemology (Lea & Street, 1998) and knowledge of how to engage in what Bakhtin's (1986) terms *diologism* (writing as a dialogue between the reader and the writer). Epistemological knowledge is developed over an extended period of engagement with a discipline, and particularly requires an understanding of its knowledge-creating processes, such as its research methods. Although this an area of knowledge that cannot be acquired solely in the tertiary writing classroom, students can be encouraged to consider the connections between the knowledge-creating paradigms of their disciplines and

their influence on its knowledge-communicating forms. To help to understand this, activities can include analytical reading and ethnographic tasks used to engage with disciplinary experts (Bruce, 2008a, p. 135-136). In relation to the specific generic elements involved in addressing and audience, Hyland (2005, p. 42) proposes a model for the types of language devices that writers use to connect with readers, termed *metadiscourse*. Using Hyland's model (2005), learner writers can be encouraged to examine the metadiscoursal features of the common genres of their particular discipline through some fairly objective textual analysis.

4. Development of critical competence

Across all sections of the academy, students' capacity for *critical thinking* (hereafter CT) is generally considered to be a core and necessary academic skill. However, operationalising CT and fostering its development through the tasks and activities of tertiary writing courses can be problematic since, like the concept of genre, there is a multiplicity of approaches and views as to what critical thinking is, and how it is developed.

Traditionally, writing and rhetoric courses have promoted the teaching of CT through writing as a set of cognitive skills that are not specifically bound to a context, and that the training of writers in the use of a set of generalisable CT skills may be transferred later into disciplinary contexts. This view has been challenged by a number of theorists and researchers reviewed by Ramanathan and Kaplan (1996) who conclude that "the transfer and general applicability of critical thinking/reasoning skills is at best a debatable one" and that the incorporation of CT into writing "is situated and context/discipline-dependent" (p. 242). This is a view that resonates with the later academic literacies views on the discipline-specificity of skills relating to academic writing.

Some also see a possible approach to the development of critical thinking (CT) by using *critical literacy* theory (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993) (hereafter CL) and the related theory of *critical pedagogy* (Kincheloe, 2008). Both theories have a socially transformative agenda in that they reject the notion of that learning should focus on a body of 'canonical' knowledge, the teaching of which is seen as reifying present inequalities and power structures. In relation to pedagogy, CL supports a critical, rather than a rule-governed approach to enquiry, beginning (like the process approach to writing) with the cultural experiences and orientations of the learner as a basis for making sense of new cultural material. Texts are seen as social constructions and CL involves their deconstruction to examine power relations that can be derived from different 'readings' or approaches to their interpretation. However, even an early supporter of this approach, Bizzell (1993), like Ramanathan and Kaplan (1996), has questioned the idea of the transferability of critical thinking skills across domains. Specifically, she questions the notion of causal relations existing between teaching academic discourse and developing critical thinking that, in turn, has the wider potential to transform or democratise societies.

In the approach taken here (in accord with the views of Ramanathan and Kaplan, 1996), it is proposed that the development of a 'critical' voice occurs within a particular disciplinary context, and, it involves the ability of students to make evaluations "within their field's accepted standards of judgement" (Swales & Feak, 1994, 2nd ed, p. 180). It is proposed here that understanding part of what constitutes the "accepted standards of judgement" within a discipline arises partly from familiarity with both its knowledge-creating processes and knowledge-reporting forms - its disciplinary genres. Like Hyland (2003), it is also proposed here that "learning about genres does not preclude a critical analysis but provides a necessary basis for critical engagement with cultural and textual practices" (p. 25).

Ultimately, employing a critical competence involves a writer exercising their own authorial voice (within their particular discourse community) in creative ways that potentially involve

individuated and innovative use of the various aspects of discourse knowledge that are at their disposal. Or, as Canagarajah (2006) puts it: "[t]o be really effective, I need to work from within the existing rules to transform the game" (p. 599). This is the endpoint or goal for student academic writers. To reach this endpoint, however, requires a well-developed, analytical knowledge of the practices of a discipline and the disciplinary genres that a student writer aims to control and eventually exploit

5. Conclusion

Tertiary writing courses in the New Zealand context are variously located within different departments of educational institutions, generally occupying a very small curricular space. Within a small time frame, teachers are expected (often unrealistically) to effect major improvements in the writing of students in order to serve the needs of the academy (and, hopefully, those of the students). Given this historical setting, it is, therefore, important to theorise tertiary writing instruction appropriately. To do this, we need to critically evaluate research and theories from a number of disciplines in the development of our courses.

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