

Academic Writing: theory and practice

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[To International Conference: "Literacy in Contemporary Society: Compiling social, political, philosophical, pedagogical and technological aspects"
Pedagogical Institute of Cyprus; October 23-4 2015]

Abstract

The Conference is 'addressed to scholars, practitioners, educators and graduate students with an interest in the topic of literacy, from Cyprus and abroad' and I will try to take into account these interests and concerns. I begin by reviewing recent theories of literacies as social practice and ethnographic methods for studying them, and signal some of the implications for educational practice. I will briefly outline the academic literacies' approach and also signal 'multilingualism' and 'superdiversity, challenging the narrow, formal view of academic writing, which tends to include a 'deficit' model of learners' literacy. I argue that the concepts I am addressing apply to academic writing in Higher Education, including University, not just school; and they involve support for teachers as well as students. I will briefly describe a research project in London schools that I conducted with Constant Leung, drawing on these concepts and bringing together work in the fields of academic literacies and of English as an Additional Language. I conclude by drawing out some of the implications of this work for both theory and practice.

Topics to be addressed

- Recent theories of literacies as social practice
- Ethnographic methods for studying them,
- Academic Literacies
- Application of these concepts to academic writing in Higher education, including University, not just school; support for teachers as well as students.
- Language Issues; multilingualism and super- diversity'.
- An example of how we might build on these concepts in a project by Leung and Street in London schools
- I conclude by drawing out some of the implications of this work for both theory and practice.

Social Literacies Research

Much of the work in this tradition, which I now refer to as 'Literacies as Social Practice' (LSP), focuses on the everyday meanings and uses of literacy in specific cultural contexts and links directly to how we understand the work of

literacy programmes, which themselves then become subject to ethnographic enquiry, as I will explain below. In trying to characterise these new approaches to understanding and defining literacy, I have referred to a distinction between an '*autonomous*' model and an '*ideological*' model of literacy (Street 1984). The '*autonomous*' model of literacy works from the assumption that literacy in itself - autonomously - will have effects on other social and cognitive practices, as in the early 'cognitive consequences' literature. The model, I argue, disguises the cultural and ideological assumptions that underpin it and that can then be presented as though they are neutral and universal. Research in the social practice approach challenges this view and suggests that in practice dominant approaches based on the autonomous model are simply imposing western (or urban etc) conceptions of literacy on to other cultures (Street, 2001). The alternative, '*ideological model of literacy*' offers a more culturally sensitive view of literacy practices as they vary from one context to another. This model starts from different premises than the autonomous model - it posits instead that literacy is a social practice, not simply a technical and neutral skill; that it is always embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles. The ways in which people address reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity and being. Literacy, in this sense, is always contested, both its meanings and its practices, hence particular versions of it are always 'ideological', they are always rooted in a particular world-view and a desire for that view of literacy to dominate and to marginalise others (Gee 1990). The argument about social literacies (Street 1995) suggests that engaging with literacy is always a social act even from the outset.

Key concepts in the LSP approach, that I will outline below, include; *Literacy Events and Literacy Practices*; *Ethnographic Perspectives*; *Academic Literacies*; *Language Issues*. I will then draw out some of the practical applications of these perspectives for work in the field.

Literacy Events and Literacy Practices

Key concepts in the field that may enable us to overcome apply these new approaches to literacy to specific contexts and practical programmes include the concepts of *literacy events* and of *literacy practices*. Shirley Brice Heath characterised a 'literacy event' as 'any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of the participants' interactions and their interpretative processes' (Heath, 1982, p. 50). I have employed the phrase 'literacy practices' (Street, 1984, p. 1) as a means of focussing upon 'the social practices and conceptions of reading and writing', although I later elaborated the term both to take account of 'events' in Heath's sense and to give greater

emphasis to the social models of literacy that participants themselves bring to bear upon those events and that give meaning to them (Street, 1988).

In a paper on this Street (2000: 22) distinguished 'literacy events' from 'literacy practices' in the following way:

'The concept of literacy practices ... attempts to handle the events and the patterns of activity around literacy but to *link* them to something broader of a cultural and social kind. And part of that broadening involves attending to the fact that in a literacy event we have brought to it concepts, social models regarding what the nature of this practice is and that make it work and give it meaning. Those models we cannot get at simply by sitting on the wall with a video and watching what is happening: you can photograph literacy events but you cannot photograph literacy practices.'

Ethnographic perspectives

In introducing ethnographic perspectives to education students, on research training courses, I have found that they sometimes feel bullied by anthropologists' claims to the concept of ethnography. A useful antidote to this has been a paper by Green and Bloome (1997) which makes a helpful distinction between 'doing ethnography' – used to describe on the one hand both what anthropologists do using fieldwork methods over a lengthy period and the product ie writing 'an ethnography' - and on the other, adopting an '*ethnographic perspective*', which takes 'a focused approach to studying particular aspects of everyday life and cultural practices of a social group'. Central to an ethnographic perspective is 'the use of theories of culture and inquiry practices derived from a variety of disciplines eg Cultural Studies, SocioLinguistics, Education, to guide the research'.

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Some of the work in Literacy as Social Practice (LSP) , including teacher inquiry and participatory project research, may be aptly termed 'ethnographic perspective', a principle that we might apply in this context.

Academic Literacies

In 1995 Mary Lea and I were awarded an ESRC grant *on academic literacies* and we proceeded to carry out research in a number of universities in the UK. In retrospect, we described the research as involving a period when 'we looked at perceptions and practices of student writing in higher education taking as case studies one new and an old university in Southern England. Set against the background of numerous changes in higher education in the UK and increasing numbers of non-traditional entrants, this research has been concerned with a wider institutional approach to student writing, rather than merely locating the problem with individual students. One of the main purposes of the research has been to move away from a skills based, deficit model of student writing and to consider the complexity of writing practices that are taking place at degree level in universities. Staff and students were interviewed in both institutions about their perceptions and interpretations of what is required in completing written assignments and about the problems that are identified in student writing. As a starting point, the research adopts the concept of academic literacies as a framework for understanding university writing practices (cf Lea & Street, 1998).

Following from this research, Mary Lea and I published an article in *Studies in Higher Education* (Lea and Street, 1998),, which attracted a great deal of attention in the fields of literacy studies and higher education studies and, latterly, English for Academic Purposes. Our 1998 article is interestingly, still cited as one of the most referenced in the journal *Studies in Higher Education*. We put forward *three 'models'* that participant university staff were seen to hold regarding student writing. In particular, the '*study skills*' model dominated much theory and practice at the time but, as this article demonstrated and subsequent studies have reinforced and developed, the reality on the ground is of multiple requirements on student writing according to context, varying with discipline but also, *inter alia*, with institutional pressures including issues of funding, and the role of subject tutors not just students. Whilst the development of what we termed the '*academic socialisation*' model, did attempt to take account of some of these issues, by 'socialising' students into the demands of the academy, we argued that the '*Academic Literacies*' (Aclits) approach, could help extend further our understanding and practice in this field. Aclits requires researchers to investigate and practitioners to take account of the variety of academic literacy practices evident in particular contexts; this includes negotiating new and varied *genres of writing*; different disciplinary requirements in terms of argumentation, information structuring and *rhetorical styles*; and different teacher preferences. Such variation and complexity meant that two of the models – study skills and academic socialisation – whilst often providing a useful starting point, were

too narrowly drawn to take account of the actual range of needs and demands and practices around writing in the university.

Application of these concepts to academic writing in Higher Education

In the Literacy field, then, it has been recognized that it is **not** appropriate, especially in international contexts, to conceptualize a single, uniform notion of 'literacy' – rather there are 'multiple literacies'. The dominant model in many countries has tended to be that students – especially 'non traditional' students - are somehow 'in deficit', they 'can't write' as many Tutors say. A solution to this has been to create centralised 'Study Skills' Programmes that address some of the formal, linguistic features that students struggle with, but these often fail to address the subject specific genres and discourses involved.

The 'Academic Literacies' approach attempts to address this issue by presenting a more complex, 'social practice', perspective. In the light of these approaches, the Academic Literacies perspective makes some of the following suggestions:

- Both Tutors and Students need to take account of more complex explanations and responses to issues associated with student writing than the simple 'deficit' model – 'students can't write' ...
- Theoretical approaches to academic writing need to take into account the 'social practices' approach rather than focusing primarily on a 'skills' approach: this involves concepts such as Genre, 'Didactics', 'Discourse' that recognise how what counts as writing may vary across contexts, especially courses, institutions and countries.

Language Issues

Applying some of these social practice approaches to the study of language has also led to a more complex, 'diverse' view of language acquisition and study – including what counts as 'English', issues that Constant Leung and I took on board in a research project in London schools, which I describe briefly below. I signal here two of the key concepts in this field; multilingualism; and 'super-diversity'.

Multilingualism

A helpful summary of how an understanding of the concept of 'multilingualism can help these discussion, is provided by Marilyn Martin-Jones (2012: 1):

'Over the last two decades, sociolinguistic research on multilingualism has been transformed. Two broad processes of change have been at work:

firstly, there has been a broad epistemological shift to a critical and ethnographic approach, one that has reflected and contributed to the wider turn, across the social sciences, towards critical and poststructuralist perspectives on social life. Secondly, over the last ten years or so, there has been an intense focus on the social, cultural and linguistic changes ushered in by globalisation, by transnational population flows, by the advent of new communication technologies, by the changes taking place in the political and economic landscape of different regions of the world. These changes have had major implications for the ways in which we conceptualise the relationship between language and society and the multilingual realities of the contemporary era. A new sociolinguistics of multilingualism is now being forged: one that takes account of the new communicative order and the particular cultural conditions of our times, while retaining a central concern with the processes involved in the construction of social difference and social inequality’.

Super-Diversity

A key contribution to the debates about language in relation to education has been work by Jan Blommaert and Ben Rampton (2012 in MMG Working Papers) that explores the scope for research on language and ‘superdiversity’. ‘Following a protracted process of paradigm shift, sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology we are’, they argue, ‘well placed to engage with the contemporary social changes associated with super-diversity’. The paper outlines key theoretical and methodological developments in language study, signalling a key issue for the present paper that ‘the contexts in which people orient their interactions reach far beyond the communicative event itself’. Also in the spirit of the present account, they make the point that the combination of linguistics and anthropology produces links ‘between super-diversity and language that is strongly embedded in ethnography.’ In understanding how the concept of superdiversity adds to what is already going on in the field of language and social practice, they state, with colleagues (Blommaert et.al, 2015):

‘for sociolinguistics itself, it is also fitting that superdiversity marks a shift of footing without disconnecting from what went before – a desire for synthesis rather than for a new subdiscipline. Diversity has been a central concern in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology for much of the 20th century, both as the focus for empirical description and as a political commitment - “[d]iversity of speech has been singled out as the main focus of sociolinguistics” (Hymes 1972:38). Furthermore, sociolinguists are now very familiar with the problems of group identification and the critiques of essentialism that give superdiversity

much of its relevance. In 1996, Dell Hymes called the idea of discrete sociolinguistic groups into question when he said that “the relationship of cultures and communities in the world today is dominantly one of reintegration within complex units” (1996:32).

However, Blommaert and colleagues also recognise that ‘contemporary conditions have repositioned and intensified the relevance of the classic linguistic anthropology apparatus, and

‘the encapsulation of both continuity and change in ‘superdiversity’ seems particularly apposite. Everyone in sociolinguistics is familiar with ‘diversity’, but ‘super’ signals something more, requiring a retuning or realignment of parts of the machinery, sometimes even the shaping and development of new elements. So in signalling selective renovation rather than wholesale reinvention in this way, ‘language and superdiversity’ is an apt and indeed rather parsimonious reformulation of the sociolinguistic enterprise, adjusting it to new times’ Blommaert et. al., 2015, p. 6).

Leung and Street research on ‘Academic Language and Literacies: modelling for diversity’

Recently scholars such as Leung, Street and others have attempted to build on these accounts of multilingualism and superdiversity, as they bring together work in the fields of academic literacies and of English as an Additional Language (EAL). Whilst work in the field of academic literacies has tended not to foreground EAL issues, research in school-based EAL, on the other hand, has tended to focus on language use and diversity more than on literacy. Epistemologically, however, there is a fit between the two traditions and it is on this basis that Leung and Street (2014) developed a research project in London schools. For many students it is this combination of language issues (both EAL and dialect variation amongst native speakers) and literacy issues that lies at the heart of their encounter with the academy and the judgements it makes about them. The academic literature in both EAL and ‘academic literacies’ studies demonstrates that the language and literacy learning issues involved in these activities are best understood as meaning-making in social practices (e.g., 2014) rather than ‘technical skills’ or ‘language deficit’.

Leung and Street built on these approaches in their research project, recognising that high levels of ethnic, linguistic and social diversity among the student population are becoming the norm in contemporary British schools and universities, especially in the London area where this research project was based. In London one-third of the school students are from a language-minority background. We collected data from ethnolinguistically diverse

London school settings, comprising video classroom recordings, student and staff interviews, student written work, printed curriculum material, and a collection of official curriculum documents. We focused in particular on theoretical issues in addressing academic literacy and language competence in socio-culturally and linguistically complex teaching and learning environments. The research, then, began with a social practices perspective on language and literacy but also built on the issues signalled above such as multilingualism and superdiversity. Our main objectives were to research the following questions:

1. What academic language and literacy practices, with respect to oral interaction, reading and writing, do the students and teachers engage in, within specified disciplines under investigation?
2. What are the expected uses of academic literacy with respect to reading and writing in curriculum assignments e.g. essays, reports etc?
3. How do students from diverse ethnic, social and linguistic backgrounds engage with and respond to the requirements for academic language and literacy practices evident in their specific disciplines and contexts?

In many of the classes we observed there was a complex mix of sources of information: in different modes – written, spoken, visual; and in different locations. We observed (Leung & Street, 2014), in keeping with the approaches signalled above, that language is but one facet of communication: “It is clearly the case that it is no longer sufficient to be able to use English (indeed any named language) in the conventional sense of being able to understand and express meaning through words and sentences, when much of what we do in digitally mediated communication involves the use of a mixture of language, visual-audio and other semiotic resources, and technical know-how to navigate and exploit the technological facilities on computers and mobile devices.’

Given these complexities, we raised the question ‘ How is literacy construed and enacted by teachers and students across the curriculum?’ and in addressing this we considered the ways in which language, in this case English, is used for communicative purposes (including reading and writing) in school contexts., an issue that again has tended to be marginalised in the more formal ‘autonomous’ model of literacy and language.

Conclusions

Drawing upon the approaches and the research briefly signaled above, I would like to suggest the following Conclusions, as ways of addressing language and literacy issues in educational contexts:

We need to make a Shift to 'social approaches' to literacy, language and education practices

Adopting an Ethnographic approach involves trying to find out what these practices actually mean to the participants, not just to those imposing tests from the outside

Education can adjust to these principles and findings; for example, we can recognise that tutors and teachers, not just students, need support in relation to academic writing

Building on the recent complex accounts of language in practice, we need to move beyond the narrow view of 'Language' as formal skills, and instead work with diversity: this can be seen especially in the ways in the notion of 'English' is addressed. whilst recognizing the long tradition of this in language studies, so that the concept of 'super diversity' does not entail 'wholesale reinvention'

...

I would like to suggest that we can look at Cyprus as a classic site for these approaches, including the existence here already of multiple language and literacy varieties, and then considering how educational contexts here might take account of the complex issues regarding language and literacy practices that have been signaled in this paper.

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