The “Academic Literacies” Model: Theory and Applications

Although the term academic literacies was originally developed with regard to the study of literacies in higher education and the university, the concept also applies to K–12 education. An academic literacies perspective treats reading and writing as social practices that vary with context, culture, and genre (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Street, 1984, 1995). The literacy practices of academic disciplines can be viewed as varied social practices associated with different communities. In addition, an academic literacies perspective also takes account of literacies not directly associated with subjects and disciplines, but with broader institutional discourses and genres. From the student point of view, the requirement to switch their writing styles and genres between one setting and another, to deploy a repertoire of literacy practices appropriate to each setting, and to handle the social meanings and identities that each evokes.

Building upon theories of reading, writing, and literacy as social practices (what has been called the New Literacy Studies; cf., Barton, 1994; Gee, 1996; Street, 1984, 1995), Lea and Street (1998, 1999) have argued for a new approach to understanding student writing and literacy in academic contexts which challenges the dominant deficit model. Rather than engaging in debates about good or bad writing, they conceptualized writing in academic contexts, such as university courses, at the level of epistemology. They argued that approaches to student writing and literacy in academic contexts could be conceptualized through the use of three overlapping perspectives or models: (a) a study skills model, (b) an academic socialization model, and (c) an academic literacies model.

The first, the study skills model, sees writing and literacy as primarily an individual and cognitive skill. This approach focuses on the surface features of language form and presumes that students can transfer their knowledge of writing and literacy unproblematically from one context to another.
other. The second, termed academic socialization, is concerned with students’ acculturation into disciplinary and subject-based discourses and genres. Students acquire the ways of talking, writing, thinking, and using literacy that typified members of a disciplinary or subject area community. The academic socialization model presumes that the disciplinary discourses and genres are relatively stable and, once students have learned and understood the ground rules of a particular academic discourse, they are able to reproduce it unproblematically. The third model, academic literacies, is concerned with meaning making, identity, power, and authority, and foregrounds the institutional nature of what counts as knowledge in any particular academic context. It is similar in many ways to the academic socialization model, except that it views the processes involved in acquiring appropriate and effective uses of literacy as more complex, dynamic, nuanced, situated, and involving both epistemological issues and social processes, including power relations among people, institutions, and social identities. To date, both at the university level and the elementary and secondary levels, it has been the skills and academic socialization models that have guided curriculum development and instructional practices, as well as research.

The three models are not mutually exclusive; rather, they overlap. All three models could be applied to any academic context, such as examining the writing and literacy practices in biology, anthropology, or teacher education and how students come to understand and use those literacy practices in each academic context. There is also overlap at a theoretical level. For example, both the academic socialization model and the academic literacies model focus attention on the relationship between epistemology and acts of writing and literacy in subject areas and disciplines (Bazerman, 1988; Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995). However, the academic literacies model goes further by focusing on the relationship of epistemology and writing not just in the subject area in general but also more generally, in institutional requirements (e.g., regarding plagiarism, feedback), as well as in more specific contexts such as variation across individual faculty members’ requirements and even individual student assignments.

The three models are helpful both for researchers trying to better understand writing and other literacy practices in academic contexts, and for educators who are developing curriculum, instructional programs, and being reflective on their own teaching practices. For example, universities often run programs that encourage participation in the university by a widening range of people with diverse backgrounds. An academic socialization model might guide how teachers help students move from note taking to doing overhead projector presentations, while an academic literacies model might make explicit how such teaching procedures are framed not as deficit for students who are nonnative speakers of English but something that all students encounter as the shift from secondary school into postsecondary education. Similarly, with regard to writing and literacy practices within a law school, a skills model focusing on the surface features of texts might apply also to an academic literacies model. This would foreground text production and the relationship between writing and epistemology, helping students understand what counts as law in a course for level one students.

**Approaches to Writing and Models of Learning**

The three models mentioned are associated with particular conceptualizations of both language and learning theory, each having its own associated roots and traditions. The study skills model is concerned with the use of written language at the surface level, and concentrates upon teaching students formal features of language, for example, sentence structure, grammar, and punctuation. It pays little attention to context and is implicitly informed by autonomous and additive theories of learning, such as behaviorism, which are concerned with the transmission of knowledge. In contrast, academic socialization models recognize that subject areas and disciplines use different genres and discourses to construct knowledge in particular ways (Bazerman, 1988; Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995). The academic socialization model is associated with the growth in constructivism.
and situated learning as organizing frames, as well as with work in the field of sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, and genre theory. The academic literacies model draws on both the skills and academic socialization models but goes further than the academic socialization model in paying particular attention to the relationships of power, authority, meaning making, and identity that are implicit in the use of literacy practices within specific institutional settings. It does not view literacy practices as residing entirely in disciplinary and subject-based communities, but examines how literacy practices from other institutions (e.g., government, business, university bureaucracy) are implicated in what students need to learn and do. Recent work on the marketization of higher education, for instance, might be called upon here (Barnett & Griffin, 1997). The academic literacies model is influenced by social and critical linguistics (Candlin & Hyland, 1999; Fairclough, 1992) and by recent critiques of sociocultural theory (Bloome, Carter, Christian, Otto, & Shuart-Faris, 2005; Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, in press) emphasizing a theory of learning that foregrounds power, identity, and agency in the role of language in the learning process.

Using the Academic Literacies Model as a Design Frame

Lillis (2003) and Lea (2004) have suggested that the academic literacies model needs to be developed as a design frame, with a focus on pedagogy. In what follows, we show how an academic literacies model can help provide a design frame for development of curriculum and instruction in two academic contexts. The first is a university program for widening participation in the university for linguistic minority students and the second is a university law program. Although these examples are from the university level in the United Kingdom, the principles and issues apply across academic contexts at secondary and elementary school levels and in other countries. The examples show the limitations of relying solely on study skills and academic socialization models. They illustrate the relative value of an academic literacies model in emphasizing the importance of teachers being explicit in showing students the shifts in genre and mode as they move between group work, speaking, note taking, presentation, more formal writing, etc. In particular, we identify the link between cultural practices and different genres, the importance of feedback on students’ written assignments in the learning process, and how both students and their teachers can learn much from the foregrounding of both meaning making and identity in the writing process.

The Academic Literacy Development Programme

One of the difficulties that many students encounter as they shift into higher education involves writing and academic discourse. Students from linguistic minority community backgrounds may experience such difficulties to a greater degree than some other students. In conjunction with government institutions concerned with widening participation, King’s College London has instituted a program for these attending schools in the nearby area who would like to move on to study at a university (not just at King’s College London). The Academic Literacy Development Programme was intended to provide additional educational opportunities for A level students (preuniversity students in the United Kingdom, equivalent to high school juniors and seniors1 in the United States) from the local area who were still in the process of learning English as an additional language. It was hoped that participation in the program would enhance both their A level performance and their chances of entering higher education. The program consisted of three-hour sessions on most Saturday mornings, from January to December. It was not an English language program per se, but rather focused on developing the use of academic English in higher educational contexts in the United Kingdom. Many of the students had spent limited time in the United Kingdom, and might be unfamiliar with the academic language and literacy practices required for university courses.

As part of this program, a team of tutors (the term used in the United Kingdom for those teach-
The authors, conducted sessions based on some of the theoretical principles developed from the academic literacies model and with recent work on multimodality and genre (Kress, 2003; Kress & Street, 2006; Van Dijk, 1997). In these sessions, students were required to interact with different categories of text that we defined as different genres and modes. We define genres as types of text, both spoken and written (student discussions, written notes, letters, academic essays, etc.). We wanted to help students be more aware of the different language and semiotic practices (the use of signs or symbols) associated with the requirements of different genres in academic contexts.

In an early session, one of the tutors gave a presentation on genre switching (see Table 1 and Figure 1). He drew attention to the fact that prior to having a discussion, just having thoughts and ideas about a subject already involves certain kinds of representation, with different language entailments than required in other forms or genres. Thoughts may, for instance, be free flowing, may not always operate in sentences, and may include images and other nonlinguistic semiosis such as colors. Then, when the students were asked to move into group talk and discussion, they were required to provide explicitness, take account of their interlocutor (a person involved in dialogue), and employ specific language features and defined speech patterns. We identified the shift from free flowing thoughts/ideas to some explicitness in discussion with others as a shift to a different genre, although as Kress has pointed out (personal communication, 2005) it also involves a shift of mode— from internal thought to external speech. Likewise, as the students shifted from talk and discussion to taking notes, new requirements came into play: for example, the need for explicit attention to language structure, use of headings, and use of visual, as well as language, modes such as layout. The tutors encouraged students to make presentations to the whole class using overhead projector slides and again drew attention to the particular genre and mode features of a slide: highlighting of key terms, use of single words, and layout. Finally, students were asked to provide a page of written text based upon the discussions and overheads. This writing required the use of joined up sentences, attention to coherence and cohesion, use of formal conventions of academic writing, and attention to editing and revision.

Each genre and mode had different qualities. In their educational histories, students had not always been made explicitly aware of these qualities as they moved between different genres in their schoolwork. They had rarely been given time to dwell on and develop the distinctive features of each genre, or to address the question of the relationship of each one, including the fluid overlap of the boundaries of each genre. In the program, teachers asked questions such as, “How do genres and modes vary across disciplines, subjects, and fields?” Students from science disciplines appeared less familiar with extended prose but adept at structured layout and use of visual signs. Social science students had had more written work to do

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>How do genres/modes vary across disciplines/subjects.fields?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Genre</td>
<td>Type of text: for example, formal/informal, notes, letters, academic essay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genre mode</td>
<td>A regularized, organized set of resources for meaning-making: for example, image, gaze, gesture, movement, speech, writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline</td>
<td>Field of study, academic subject: for example, geography, chemistry, business studies, area studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switching/transformation</td>
<td>Changing meanings and representations from one mode (e.g., speech) into another mode (e.g., writing), often involving a different mix of both modes (e.g., writing and layout)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
in their school practice but had not necessarily differentiated its features from those of talk and visual layout as explicitly as being done in these sessions. In some cases the students reported that the teachers in their regular school would follow a discussion by asking them to write it up without necessarily making explicit the different requirements as they switched genre from speech to writing or from notes to essays. In the Academic Literacy Development Programme, explicit attention was focused on such switching, transformation, and the changing of meanings and representations from one genre and mode to another. In addition, they discussed how this often involves a different mix of two or more genres and modes, such as the notion that writing always creates meaning through layout, as well as through the use of words. Attention to these issues constituted a basic premise of the pedagogy in the course.

As we focused on the different genres that participants used within and across different activity frames, the issue of mode of representation also needed to be addressed. Since the activities differed in terms of type of content represented and genres used, a linguistic analysis of the texts produced was not sufficient to convey the range of semiotic resources used by participants. Multi-semiotic theories of communication emphasize the need to look at all forms of communication in terms of their representation across different

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THOUGHTS/IDEAS</th>
<th>Free flowing; not sentences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TALK/DISCUSSION</td>
<td>Some explicitness; awareness of speaker’s communicative needs, language mode/speech patterns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOTES</td>
<td>Some structure, headings, layout, use of visual as well as language mode</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OVERHEAD</td>
<td>Key terms, single words, lay out, semiosis (use of signs or symbols)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WRITTEN TEXT</td>
<td>Joined up sentences, coherence/cohesion, if academic then formal conventions; editing and revision</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Genre/mode switching.

Literacies Of and For a Diverse Society
modes—linguistic, actional, and visual—that are differently organized and established meaning-making resources (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1976, 2001). A multimodal analysis enabled the teachers to depict and analyze the range of meanings expressed in the different activities and the genres associated with them. It also allowed the teachers to theorize the multimodal nature of literacy, and thus of different genres, that students needed to learn in order to represent different types of curriculum content for different purposes, and therefore to participate in different activities. For instance, when students presented their own overhead projector slides, we helped them see the importance not only of subject content (e.g., the themes necessary for the statement about their personal background and interests required on the university application form) but also of layout, how they ordered the data using font, capitals, arrows, etc.

The team members who taught the program also engaged in ethnographic-style research. They were interested in the relationship between the program objectives and actual experiences and perceptions of the sessions by the students and the tutors. As one of the tutors who both taught the course and engaged in research with it, noted:

The ALD programme tries to challenge some of the expectations students may have met at school … about language as narrowly defined … the course involves issues of discourse, genre, writing as social process … within a notion of building on what they already had and bring to the programme rather than treating them as a deficit and just fixing that.

As Street and Scalone (in press) noted in their analysis of the Programme, by expressing personal styles and learning strategies during classroom activities and engaging with their related genres, students participated in both the community of the academy and in the community formed by the students during the course. Furthermore, by engaging with the types of literacy required in higher education in the United Kingdom, they collaboratively constructed an understanding of official requirements and participated in learning-oriented activities. Interaction with other students and with tutors was, therefore, fundamental in making explicit the different types of knowledge students already used and that they needed to develop and customize to fit higher education standards. Linking these findings with the three models proposed by Lea and Street (1998), the report by Street and Scalone (in press) concludes:

Treating such students as collaborators in the development of the academic literacies necessary for engagement with Higher Education in the United Kingdom can perhaps offer a different and more supportive route to “Widening Participation” than the more traditional focus on either study skills or academic socialization.

Open University Law Faculty: Writing Level One Course Materials

The second example of using an Academic Literacies Model as a Design Frame involves a very different group of teachers and students: university law faculty and students. In this example, we focus on the issues of meaning making and identity in academic writing.

The Open University provides courses for more than 200,000 students worldwide studying at a distance, both online and with more traditional print-based courses. The method of study is described as supported learning: all students are placed in either online or face-to-face tutorial groups and have good access to support from an academic tutor. Nevertheless, specially written course materials constitute the major part of the teaching context. The courses are designed by the university’s central faculty who—as is the case with more conventional universities—are appointed on the basis of their expertise and research standing in a particular academic field, in this instance in law. As with other higher education institutions, the Open University is at present responding to increased student demand for courses in vocational and professional areas. For some years, the university has been offering higher-level courses for students who wish to gain a law degree. Recently, however, the faculty decided to extend their course offerings and provide introduc-
tory, undergraduate, level one study in law, which would introduce students:

- to the nature and function of rules and law, to the distinctiveness of legal reasoning, and to the way in which law both responds to social phenomena and contributes to the development of different social, business and economic institutions (Retrieved October 17, 2005, from the Open University Website at: http://www3.open.ac.uk/courses/bin/p12.dll?C01W100_9_63).

Since they were more familiar with conventional, higher-level university law study, the faculty designing this course and its materials were offered two professional development workshops in order to explore the nature of writing level one course materials. These workshops were based on principles from the academic literacies model, foregrounding the relationship between mode, genre, literacies, and identities. However, unlike the students in the King’s College Academic Literacy Development Programme, faculty participating in the workshops were not introduced explicitly to any of the underlying principles that provided the theoretical perspective that underpinned the tasks and activities. Rather, faculty members were offered the opportunity to consider the implications of being an academic writer in relation to the very specific mode of written course materials, with a particular but implicit focus on issues of meaning making and identity in this context.

Participants were introduced to the nature of writing as more than a technical skill, again with no explicit mention of the theoretical work on writing as social practice. In order to foreground the nature of both meaning making and identity in the writing process, the first workshop concentrated on the student perspective, exploring the nature of different written genres in samples of distance learning materials. It also examined the written genres that constituted the discipline of law and the implications of student writer identity (Ivanic, 1998), but in this instance in relation to the reading process, in relation to students’ reading of distance learning materials. The underlying principles of an academic literacies model were implicitly introduced through participant engagement in the activities themselves.

The first workshop provided faculty with the opportunity to explore the main challenges in making distance course materials successful through a lens that concentrated on meaning making and identity. It examined how writing for students from a diverse audience contrasted with other kinds of academic writing, with which participants were more familiar. The law faculty participants considered what difficulties they believed students might have in reading and working with the course materials, and what potential problems might arise between students’ everyday knowledge about law and studying law as an academic subject. Faculty members were asked to construct imaginary case studies of students who might take such a course, concentrating on issues such as prior experience, both of study and of law—in lay, professional, and academic contexts—and students’ expectations of studying at a distance. In working together on these activities, participants, who had no particular academic interest in language or literacies, began to tacitly identify the diverse literacy practices involved in the meaning-making process, including practices of potential students who would bring their own identities and understandings to their reading of the course materials. These issues were explored without explicitly introducing faculty to the particular language of description provided by literacies research, concerning the constraints and opportunities of mode and their implications in relation to literacy practices.

The second workshop followed some weeks after the first, giving participants the opportunity to reflect upon the implications of the workshop activities for their own practice. Although language is clearly foregrounded in the study of law, participants reported that they had not previously considered the complexity of writing course texts. The first workshop had made them think much more about the issues involved in writing for a potentially very diverse audience. Prior to the workshops, their main focus had been on the content matter of this particular course, one which somewhat broke with tradition of what counts as undergraduate law study. What is interesting to the au-
thors, as academic literacies researchers, is that faculty were able to engage with the notion of writing as social and contextual practice without our explicitly introducing the research or its conceptual framing on which the workshops had been based. Although faculty members recognized that the course materials needed to be written in a way that addressed diverse audiences, they were also concerned that an attempt to simplify and explicate fully might lead to a dilution of legal concepts, or even inaccuracies in the course material. This indicated some tension between an academic socialization and an academic literacies perspective.

The second workshop also had a rather different focus, away from the student and toward faculty members themselves as writers. One of the underlying assumptions of an academic literacies model is that educators need to be concerned with literacies more generally across academic contexts and not only the assessed texts produced by students, such as the papers students submit for grades or the examinations they take (Lea & Street, 1999). By focusing on the writing practices of the academics themselves, the sessions drew on this broader notion of academic literacies, recognizing the variety in institutional practices that are involved in academics’ own writing. Starting with the notion of academics as writers, participants were given the opportunity to examine their own literacy practices and the implications these might have for their writing identities as course materials writers. As in the previous workshop, where the focus had been on identity and meaning making for the student reader, the conceptual framing was left implicit. Faculty members were asked to list the kinds of writing that they undertook as part of their role as an academic (see Figure 2). This produced a list of very diverse texts. However, in discussions around the nature of their writing, an interesting distinction emerged between public and private writing, which participants regarded as particularly significant for them as writers in both professional and academic domains. As with the students, they were bringing their own experiences of meaning making and identity to their writing of this particular law course, thus foregrounding the relationship between writing and issues of epistemology, which is a dominant framing in the literacies research field.

The workshops provided the opportunity to operationalize the principles of the academic literacies model in an institutional context (Lea & Street, 1998). In this instance, pedagogic practice is associated with the specific mode of distance learning course materials. With their focus on identity, meaning making, student diversity, writing for different audiences, and faculty academic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic papers (public)</th>
<th>MA website materials (public)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Briefs for counsel/skeleton arguments for court (public)</td>
<td>Assignment questions (semi-public)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual reports (public)</td>
<td>Course descriptions (semi-public)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syllabus (public)</td>
<td>Feedback on assignments (private)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own postgraduate writing (MA, PhD)</td>
<td>Research proposals (public)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal articles (public)</td>
<td>Minutes (semi-public)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letters to students (private)</td>
<td>Notes (private)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning tutorial (private)</td>
<td>OU papers (semi-public)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lecture notes (private)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. Law faculty experience of other academic/professional writing.
writing, these two workshops enabled members of the faculty to engage with some of the key concepts from the academic literacies model, despite the fact that they were not familiar with this language of description, nor were they introduced to it explicitly in the sessions. The sessions were presented as very practical in nature, and designed to address faculty concerns about writing this specific law course, enabling them to reflect upon their own writing and the ways in which the subject of law is constructed in academic (as opposed to legal) contexts through particular and contextualized writing practices, thus foregrounding the relationship between writing and epistemological imperatives. It also provided them with the tools to consider the ways course texts are mediated by both student and academic identities, and how meanings are negotiated through engagement in written and multimodal texts in specific and localized contexts.

Conclusion

With regard to writing and other literacy practices in educational contexts, three models have been proposed to guide educators: a skills model, an academic socialization model, and an academic literacies model. Using experiences in two very different academic programs, we have shown how an academic literacies model can be used to frame curricular and instructional design. Rather than focusing on student deficits, an approach using the academic literacies model foregrounds the variety and specificity of institutional practices, and students’ struggles to make sense of these. In the two academic contexts described in this article, the instructional leaders (the tutors) worked closely with the participants (the students in the Academic Literacy Development Programme and the law faculty in the Open University workshops) to collaboratively investigate the range of genres, modes, shifts, transformations, representations, meaning-making processes, and identities involved in academic learning within and across academic contexts. These understandings, when made explicit, provide greater opportunities for teaching and learning, as well as for examining how such literacy practices are related to epistemological issues.

Notes

1. A level refers to students in the United Kingdom who are one or two years away from applying to a university. In order to be admitted, these students need to do well in their studies and on their A-level examinations. There is no exact analogous situation in the United States; the closest would be juniors and seniors in high school taking classes preparing them for college, and taking college entrance tests such as the SATs, Advance Placement examinations, etc.

References


