WRITING CRAFT: RECONCEPTUALISING ACADEMIC LITERACIES

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Lea and Street’s (1998) academic socialisation model conceptualises writing in higher education as a process of acculturation, through which students are inducted into academic norms and conventions. This model has been criticised for its failure to engage with wider issues of identity, power and authority and so recent literature has tended to favour an academic literacies approach which locates student writing within wider institutional contexts, practices and discourses. The purpose of this paper is to revisit issues relating to socialisation and academic writing, by drawing on Richard Sennett’s recent work on craftsmanship (Sennett, 2008). In this paper, I discuss the main ideas raised in Sennett’s work which may be of relevance to academic writing and consider how understandings of writing as craftwork might provide a productive frame for developing pedagogic practice within the academy.

Introduction

Lea and Street (1998) suggest there are three main approaches to student writing. The study skills model takes the view that students have a deficit in their writing practices which can be addressed through learning a set of skills. The second approach, the “academic socialisation” model, is to view the process of learning to write in higher education as process of acculturation, through which the student is inducted into the institutional culture of the academy. The final approach is the academic literacies approach, which views universities as sites of discourse and power, and sees academic practices as reflecting issues of epistemology and identity rather than simply issues of skill or socialisation.

This typology has been extremely influential in educational research and scholarship and much of the recent literature has adopted an academic literacies approach which has located student writing within an explicitly social, political and institutional framework (e.g. Baynham, 2000; Lillis, 2001; Thesen, 2001). Although the academic literacies model has become the preferred theoretical framework in this area, it seems that the study skills approach remains the dominant approach in institutional strategies for supporting student writing. One reason for this may be that, although the academic literacies approach posits a powerful critique of current practices and pedagogies relating to student writing, it has limited applicability as a pedagogical frame for action (Lillis, 2003).

Academic Socialisation

The academic socialisation model emphasises the importance of induction, orientation and acculturation in learning how to write in the academy. Located in social constructivist approaches to education and anthropological understandings of culture, it conceives of academic writing as a process of coming to know about academic norms and conventions through immersion in the environment. Thus Ballard and Clancy (1988) argue that becoming literate in the university involves “…learning to “read” the culture, learning to come to terms with its distinctive rituals, values, styles of language and behaviour” (p.8).

Lillis (2003) further differentiates between implicit and explicit strands of the academic socialisation model. The implicit approach suggests that academic writing practices can be gradually acquired through interactions with peers, tutors and texts as students learn how to write or to perform their identities as novice members of the academy. This approach is characteristic of an era of elite education where students were assumed to arrive at university with the requisite literacy skills. However, with the expansion of higher education to include non-traditional students and changes in schools based assessments, most institutions have recognised that this approach is inadequate.

Many institutions have therefore taken a more explicit approach in attempting to socialising students into academic practices through induction, study skills courses and guides and the use of explicit
assessment criteria in marking assessments. The rationale is that metacognition, that is, knowing about conventions and strategies, will enable students to improve their writing (Nightingale, 1988). However, Bock (1988) raises concerns that this may lead to “Pygmalion syndrome” where students adopt the more superficial aspects of a disciplinary discourse but lack the deep conceptual understandings underpinning these concepts.

**Limitations of Academic Socialisation**

There are a number of criticisms that have been made of the academic socialisation model. First, it assumes that the norms and practices of academic writing can be made explicit. Although the traditional rhetoric and genre theory approaches attempt to elucidate some of the structural and linguistic features of academic writing, it may be more difficult to explicate the deeper epistemic features of discourse. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) suggest that privileged forms of academic discourse, such as the essay, are governed by discourses which are deeply embedded in institutional culture. They are taken for granted and hence the rules for their production remain implicit.

Furthermore, there are difficulties in making visible the tacit knowledge and understandings that underpin much of professional activity (Eraut, 2000). Academics themselves may have been socialised into the norms of academic writing through a process of implicit learning, and may be unable to identify or articulate the norms. Thus researchers have found that tutors have struggled to explain what they meant by terms such as “critically analyse”, “structure”, “evaluate” which were in assessment criteria and in feedback to students (Norton, 1990). Writing can therefore become part of the “hidden curriculum”, that is, that part of the curriculum which is implicit and is embedded in non-verbal practices and processes (Sambell & McDowell, 1998).

The second criticism of this approach is that it overestimates the homogeneity of academic discourse. The cultural approach allows for a more sophisticated understanding of writing as culturally and contextually situated within a specific academic environment, but may fail to acknowledge the extent to which views about appropriate academic writing practices vary within disciplines, departments and even course teams. In a modular curricular framework where subjects are combined with other disciplines, the potential for conflicting norms and expectations is exacerbated.

A third criticism is that this approach treats academic discourse as uncontested. For example, writing guides and study skills programmes often advise students that good academic writing is written in the third person, uses the passive voice or avoids personal experience. Yet all of these features are characteristic of a specific form of essayist literacy that is socially constructed and culturally and historically situated (Lillis & Turner, 2001). Radical educators such as Knoblauch and Brannon (1984) suggest that by teaching these conventions, writing tutors are collaborating in the reproduction of existing knowledge and power structures in universities, and reinforcing the marginalisation of students’ own voices and experience (Kramer-Dahl, 1995).

The final argument is that the academic socialisation approach fails to acknowledge issues of power and inequality in academic writing. Lillis (2001) suggests that academic writing practices reflect a particular form of privileged discourse, which has, through the hegemonic power that academics exercise in the field of knowledge production, become established as the natural discourse of the communication of ideas within the academic environment. Furthermore, in relation to individual pieces of work, the student writer is positioned by the tutor who sets the assessment task and explicitly judges what is relevant to write and how it should written (Starfield, 2004). Power differentials between students and academics make it difficult for students to offer a critique of the dominant discourse. These power relations between reader and writer are central to an understanding of student writing (Ivanic, 1998). In assuming that simply using adopting the norms and practices of academic discourse provides access to the institution, the model also does not account for wider structural inequalities. At the institutional level, the discourse practices themselves may represent particular ideological structures that may serve to exclude particular groups of students (Ivanic, 1998).
In conclusion, then, the academic socialisation model provides a more textured understanding of student writing than that offered by the study skills model, insofar as it acknowledges the complex cultural and social conditions which novice academic writers may have to negotiate. The observation by Ballard and Clanchy that “…becoming literate involves becoming acculturated: learning to read and write the culture” (1988, p.19) is relatively uncontroversial. The point of departure lies in the extent to which this acculturation is problematised. For Lea and Street, the academic socialisation approach is unsatisfactory because “institutional practices, including processes of change and the exercise of power, do not seem to be sufficiently theorised” (1998, p. 159). Perceiving student illiteracy as essentially a misreading of the culture fails to account for those students who have not acquired the cultural or social capital with which to negotiate the rules of the game.

Craftsmanship

Sennett’s book The Craftsman is the first in a planned trilogy on material culture and techniques through which particular ways of life are conducted. He uses the term craftsmanship to refer to “an enduring, basic human impulse, the desire to do a job well for its own sake” (p.9) and argues that every human being has the potential to become a craftsman. In the first part of the book, he focuses on the conditions in which craftsmanship is transmitted and how masters and apprentices have worked together in communities to develop skills and practices. He argues that, despite the unequal power relationships, workshops worked as effective mechanisms for the transfer of both explicit and tacit knowledge between generations. Sennett traces the breakdown of the mechanism to circumstances where personality or talent prompted the development of unique, individuated practices. This concern with individuation as the foundation of competition and the undermining of the community echoes themes in his earlier work on capitalism and the global economy (Sennett, 1998, 2006).

The second part of the book explores how skills are developed through physical practices. Sennett suggests that craftwork establishes “a realm of skill and knowledge perhaps beyond human verbal capacities to explain” (p.95) and that craftsmanship is located in the physical senses as embodied practice. He contends, therefore, that the primary mechanism for the transfer of tacit knowledge is physical involvement in the practice, although he also suggests that knowledge can be explicated through telling as well as showing, provided that such directions are expressive rather than denotative. By this he means directions which take a holistic approach – tools might include sympathetic illustration, which acknowledge and empathise the difficulties experienced by a beginner; scene narrative, which locates provides context and detail for the new situation and metaphorical instruction which provides an imaginative frame through which the learner can develop. The final point with which Sennett concludes with his argument is that motivation, rather than talent is the key to good craftsmanship.

Writing as Craft

The notion of academic writing as craft or as craft for a metaphor for academic writing has been explored by others (Richardson, 1990; Thody, 2006). However, Sennett’s work has the potential to contribute to both our theoretical understandings of writing as embodied social practice and to a rethinking of our current pedagogical practices.

First, he draws attention to the importance of the social and collaborative processes in the socialisation process. The academic socialisation model of student writing has carried with it connotations of inequality and exploitation, and whilst Sennett recognises the inequalities between master and apprentice, he does not consider this problematic, provided that the relationships are co-operative rather than competitive. Sennett’s emphasis on the community as the mechanism through which good quality work is produced and the belief that both individuated genius and centralised bureaucratic control are threats to that quality provide an interesting perspective on how and why writing as a craft skill might be under threat within higher education. In humanities and social science subjects at least, writing and the assessment of writing remains an essentially private activity and current attempts to
provide explicit induction to academic practices through study skills courses, guides and assessment criteria still rely on highly individualised notions of writing and assessment.

Sennett’s work suggests that for the transmission of successful writing practices to be truly effective, experts needs to becomes more sociable, because anti-social expertise emphasises inequality in skill, can humiliate the novice and inhibit knowledge transfer. Disciplines outside the social sciences display significantly different “signature pedagogies” (Shulman, 2005) which are perhaps more conducive to this form of teaching, learning and assessment practice. This is reflected to some extent in professional writing practice, where for example, co-authored papers and collaborative research are relatively commonplace. In social sciences, even where collaborative research teams are increasingly prevalent, there is evidence to suggest that very few articles have four or more authors (Acedo, Barroso, Casanueva, & Galan, 2006).

In terms of practical pedagogical strategies, Sennett’s work may suggest that collaborative writing practices provide a more effective strategy through which to transfer the tacit knowledge which underpins effective academic writing. There is indeed a growing research literature on academic writing which suggests that structured programmes provide an effective strategy for writing practice and productivity. A number of universities have supported the introduction of academic writing groups and writers’ retreats for academic staff, and the evidence suggest that these interventions have enhanced academic publication rates (McGrail, Rickard, & Jones, 2006).

Conclusion

In this paper, I have suggested that Sennett’s work provides several useful insights into the development of craft and craftsmanship which may develop current conceptions of academic socialisation and serve as a specific pedagogical frame for the teaching and learning of academic writing. There are, however, some limitations which require further exploration.

The first is the extent to which he has developed a theory which is based on models of socialisation and apprenticeship which are exclusively male. Whilst the term craftsmanship does perhaps have a particular meaning within the English language which has no gender neutral equivalent, the absence of examples of models involving women in his work is striking. His teacher, Hannah Arendt, provides the inspiration for the book and Pandora the metaphor for the potential destructiveness of man made things, but nearly all of Sennett’s craftsmen – goldsmiths, violin makers, Linux programmers - are male. In a sense, this reinforces the particular historical context in which the concept of craftsmanship developed, and indeed, Sennett traces the development of the concept back to an ancient Greece which excluded domestic skills from the definition of craftsmanship. However, the examples he has chosen seem to reinforce rather than challenge the historical roots of the definition.

The second key criticism is the absence of connections to the literature and research on communities of practice. Lave and Wenger’s (1991) work characterised communities of practice as engaged in a joint enterprise that is mutually understood and negotiated and which draws on a shared repertoire of communal resources and the model allows for the possibility of a single community in which students may become apprenticed through “legitimate peripheral participation” in its culture and practices. The process of engagement with the community of practice facilitates situated learning and the acquisition of the knowledge and skills which enable transition from novice to expert. This resonates with many of the key themes that emerge in Sennett’s work, yet the notion of craft skills is largely unexplored.

Nevertheless, Sennett’s work provides an opportunity to rethink and redevelop the academic socialisation model and suggest a more sophisticated theoretical and practical model through which tacit knowledge involved in academic writing can be brought to the surface.
References


