Academic literacy and the decontextualised learner

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Abstract

The literacy practices that are valued in the university emerge from specific disciplinary histories yet students are often expected to master these as if they were common sense and natural. This article argues that the autonomous model of literacy, which sees language use as the application of a set of neutral skills, continues to dominate in South African universities. This model denies the extent to which taking on disciplinary literacy practices can be difficult and have implications for identity. It also allows disciplinary norms to remain largely opaque and beyond critique. Furthermore, the autonomous model of literacy is often coupled with a discourse of the 'decontextualised learner' who is divorced from her social context, with higher education success seen to be resting largely upon attributes inherent in, or lacking from, the individual. Sadly, alternative critical social understandings have not been widely taken up despite their being well researched. Indeed, such understandings have often been misappropriated in ways that draw on critical social terminology to offer autonomous, decontextualised, remedial student interventions. We argue that these issues are implicated in students' accusations that universities are alienating spaces.

Keywords: academic literacy, language, student protests, decontextualised learner, ideological model, autonomous model

Introduction

Throughout 2015 and 2016, South African universities have been rocked by student protests of various forms. Early in 2015, #Rhodesmustfall protests called for the decolonisation of South African campuses with a particular focus on curriculum. Later in the same year, further protests under the #Feesmustfall hashtag focused on the burden that ever-increasing tuition fees have placed on students. Such student-led calls for change have continued into 2016 and, as we write this paper, universities across the country are experiencing protests in the face of a failure of the Presidential Commission examining tuition fees to report before 2017 budgets have to be prepared.

What do these protests have to do with academic literacy? In this paper we argue that, depending on the understanding of literacy one adopts, they have a great deal to do with the

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mastery of a 'way of being' required of students as they engage with higher education, which in turn are part of how the protests can be understood.

Understandings of literacy in South Africa

As we have shown in our previous work (Boughey, 2002, 2012a; McKenna, 2010, 2012), language has always been a contentious issue in South African higher education. As long ago as 1993, Bradbury pointed out that it is politically expedient to argue that the difficulties black students experience as they engage with learning in higher education are because of their status as speakers of an additional language. The dominant discourse of black students experiencing problems in higher education because of 'language issues' is a liberal one that allowed a seemingly virtuous move away from previous apartheid explanations of cognitive difference. But the argument is not innocuous and it has allowed social differences and institutional culture issues to be erased under the label of a supposedly neutral 'language problem' inherent in the student. The difficulty of engaging with complex abstract concepts in a language other than one's home language is presented in the 'language problem' argument as if unrelated to the social groupings of students or staff or the institution within which the language is used. So, the 'language problem' became the convenient catch-all explanation for the racially differentiated success rates which continue to this day (CHE, 2016). The assignment of 'language problems' to working class black students as they entered South African universities therefore allowed multiple structural issues to be elided.

From the early 1980s onwards, the field of Academic Development responded to the 'language problem' by drawing on what Christie (1993) identifies as the 'received tradition of English teaching'. Teaching in this 'tradition' focuses on the application of grammatical and spelling rules and, through history, it has served to deny learners access to powerful modes of using language. Pennycook (1994) argues that the 'English language teaching industry' is a response to the growth of English as a global language and the desire of people across the world to acquire a language perceived as having economic and social worth.

This growth in the use of English corresponded with developments in linguistics and language study in the universities which was then used to develop particular approaches to language teaching. These approaches focused on the forms of English, along with a set of allegedly neutral reading and writing 'skills' in the belief that this was what students needed to succeed in the academy. This led to a plethora of language courses, known variously as 'English for Academic Purposes', 'English Second Language' and so on. At times such courses were compulsory for all students, at others these were just for those students identified as having a 'language problem' which needed to be fixed through some intervention outside of the mainstream curriculum (McKenna, 2004). Critics such as Vilikazi and Tema insisted, back in 1985, that 'the diagnosis of the problem widely accepted in white universities is largely incorrect' (19). Ndebele argued in 1993 that 'language' was being used as a seemingly neutral instrument to maintain domination. But such cautions were generally ignored.

From the early 1990s onwards, another set of understandings began to be introduced for thinking about the 'language problem' based on the work of social anthropologist Brian Street (1984, 1993, 1995) and others working in the field known as 'New Literacy Studies'. Street (1984) identifies two contradictory understandings of literacy: a problematic but

dominant 'autonomous model' and an 'ideological model'. The 'autonomous model' views reading and writing as involving a set of skills focusing on the encoding and decoding of printed text. From this perspective, reading and writing involves learning sound-symbol correlations and gaining fluency in their processing alongside mastering the mechanics of the language in order to produce grammatically accurate text. As we have previously argued (Boughey, 2002; McKenna, 2004), this model is related to what Christie (1985) terms 'a model of language as an instrument of communication', which sees language as a vehicle for transmitting thought that pre-exists language. Clearly, the need to 'transmit' thought in a language other than one's home language adds complexity to the model and often leads to assumptions that the problem is with students' proficiency with the 'vehicle' of transmission, that is the forms of the additional language.

Street argues for an alternative to the 'autonomous model', the 'ideological model', which presents a very different view of reading and writing. For Street, both reading and writing are best understood as socially embedded practices – things people do in relation to printed text – which emerge out of a set of beliefs and values common to particular communities about what it is *appropriate* to do. There are thus many different ways of approaching and engaging with either the production or the reception of text – many different *literacies* – some of which are constructed as having more value within specific contexts than others.

This idea of multiple 'literacies' led to the construct of academic literacy which, following the 'ideological model' would be defined as ways of engaging with and producing written text valued in the academy. Following on from the understanding that literacy is a multiple, rather than a singular phenomenon, the term academic literacy can then be extended to the idea of academic literacies, each of which is shaped by the particular disciplinary context in which it is used. This then accounts for the fact that quite different kinds of texts are valued in different disciplines.

In many respects, and as we have pointed out (Boughey, 2002; McKenna, 2012), the 'ideological model' of literacy relates to what Christie (1993) terms 'a model of language as a resource'. This model, draws on Halliday's (1973, 1978, 1989, 1994) Systemic Functional Linguistics to provide a view of language as a tool for making meanings rather than merely transmitting them. Language use is understood to be a system of choices which are made on the basis of a user's understanding of the context in which they are located. From this perspective, many of the difficulties experienced by students with regard to language can be seen to stem from the alien and alienating nature of the higher education context (Boughey, 2005). The 'ideological model of literacy' and the 'model of language as a resource' challenge the idea that language use is neutral. These models take language firmly into the domain of the social where structures such as class, gender and race intersect each other and intersect in turn with other social structures such as disciplinary norms and institutional culture. This intersectionality needs to be taken into account in explaining students' experiences.

We have already referred to the field of 'New Literacy Studies'. Other work by researchers and theorists in the field adds to this kind of *social* understanding of academic literacy and language use by extending it to 'ways of being' in the world. Gee (2012: 152),

for example, introduced the concept of 'Discourse', defined in the 2012 edition of his work, as:

> ... composed of distinctive ways of speaking/listening and often, too, writing/reading coupled with distinctive ways of acting, interacting valuing, feeling, dressing, thinking, believing, with other people and with various objects, tools, and technologies, so as to enact specific socially recognizable identities engaged in specific socially recognized activities.

For Gee, then, a Discourse is a 'socially recognizable identity', a 'way of being' in the world. We all develop a primary Discourse thanks to the home into which we are born and the community in which we live. Others around us enact this Discourse and we acquire it over time. Other ways of being (which may encompass reading and writing) are understood to be acquired through exposure to particular social spaces and are termed by Gee (1990) 'secondary Discourses'. There is no limit to the number of secondary Discourses we can acquire over a lifetime. This all depends on the extent to which we encounter them.

One of the most important points made by Gee is that Discourses are inherently value-laden. Over time, particular Discourses become privileged because of their association with specific social spaces. Academic Discourses are privileged in the university. If an individual's primary Discourse is closely aligned to the academic Discourses of the university, and typically this is the case for students from educated, middle class homes, then the acquisition of academic Discourses is easier. An individual whose home Discourse is very different from those of the academy will encounter academic Discourses as alien and even incomprehensible. We can thus begin to see how power and social privilege are implicated in developing the 'ways of being' valued by the university.

There have been studies across the world that show that socioeconomic background serves as a strong indicator of university success (Borrego, 2008; Kuh et al., 2007; Walpole, 2003). There is thus a question about the extent to which the higher education sector simply reinforces the inequalities of the status quo or engages with the multiple causes of uneven access to a graduate qualification. As long as our everyday expectations, embedded as they are with unexamined assumptions, are normalised, it can be argued that we are implicated in the reproduction of class divides.

Literacy in the Curriculum

It is not difficult to see the way the academic literacies required of students in academic contexts is experienced by some students as colonial. De Kadt and Mathonsi (2003), Mgqwashu (2016) and others have pointed out that the expectation that students take on a set of literacy practices, or 'ways of being', without such practices being made overt and open to critique, feels like an imposition on identity. It can seem that academia consists of a 'code' that students are expected to crack without anyone mentioning that it exists or explaining how it works (McKenna, 2012).

As we have pointed out elsewhere (Boughey, 2013), the essentially 'social' understandings of literacy, and of learning itself, have been available for many years now. Niven (2012) describes how the research which articulates the social and political nature of

academic literacies has been plentiful in South Africa, to the extent that it has been widely referenced in the United Kingdom, Australia and elsewhere. Mehl (1988), Angelil-Carter (1998), Thesen (1998), Jacobs (2005), Makoni (2000), Janks (2000), de Kadt and Mathonsi (2003), Luckett and Luckett, (2009), Mgqwashu (2009), and many others have contributed to a rich and detailed understanding of the socially constructed literacy practices demanded by the academy and the implications thereof for educators attempting to enable epistemological access (Morrow, 2009).

Sadly, as Niven (2012) goes on to show, such work has had little impact on the dominance of the autonomous model in the university classroom. Most of those teaching in higher education (including those with the responsibility for student development and support in various academic development initiatives) continue to draw on the 'autonomous' model of literacy. Even more significantly, our own research (Boughey and McKenna, 2015; Boughey, 2013) shows that many working in the academic development field *appropriate* those terms that acknowledge the profoundly social and value laden nature of literacy. These terms are then applied to the very model they refute. In this way the term 'academic literacy' and similar concepts are used to mask what we have termed 'decontextualised' approaches to student development (Boughey and McKenna, 2015). Such decontextualised approaches include generic 'academic literacy' courses which construct the ability to read and write in socially legitimated ways in the academy as simply a matter of acquiring a set of neutral, a-social, a-cultural, and a-political 'skills'. These courses often completely fail to acknowledge that reading and writing in the ways sanctioned by the academy have implications for students at the level of identity.

'Critical reading' for example, is often taught as if it was a neutral skill involving the identification of key words or the use of headings and sub-headings to negotiate a text. In the academy, however, the term 'critical reading' refers to something very different – to the ability to use our knowledge of the world and our knowledge of other texts to *interrogate* and *challenge* the text we are reading. 'Critical reading' entails being inclined to take a position in response to a text which may include questioning its very basis. A 'social' understanding of this process would acknowledge that reading in this way is a peculiar activity which is legitimated only in some, and not all, social contexts. In other contexts, a literal reading of the text based on an understanding of the text as 'The Word' might be privileged and taking an interrogative approach may be deemed inappropriate behaviour. As just one example of the multiple practices the academy legitimates, 'critical reading' can be seen to require shifts at the level of identity, or a repositioning of 'ways of being' in the world.

Another example of the way in which the value-laden and social understanding of literacy has been appropriated to serve a decontextualised approach is that of teaching writing as a matter of accuracy in the mechanics of the language in 'Academic Literacy' courses. Such academic development courses often focus on grammar or language structure, such as structuring an 'essay' around an 'introduction', 'body' and 'conclusion'. While technical accuracy and structure are important, it is the production of an argument that is central to writing in the academy, where the term 'argument' is used very specifically to refer to the construction of a series of claims, each of which is supported by evidence, to support a series

of more encompassing claims embodying a particular position, the 'argument' itself (Boughey, 2012b).

The development of evidence-based 'knowledge claims' emerges in quite different forms in different disciplines and is a focus of *academic* literacies and not *all* literacies. Some other literacies privilege the restatement of 'facts' or 'knowledge' found in texts in a verbatim fashion, a phenomenon which could be related to a valuing of text as 'The Word' to be revered and repeated. To be able to produce evidence-based knowledge claims, students not only need to know that this is what is valued in the university but also to 'give themselves permission' to try to make those claims. They then need to be exposed to regular writing practices which allow them to test and refine the kinds of claims and evidence that 'count' within the particular discipline as well as the way they are linked into an argument. This is done through frequent drafting and grappling with feedback. Once again, it is possible to see that the acquisition of academic literacies requires shifts at the level of identity of who students are and who they can be.

The idea that the literacy practices demanded in the academy are neutral is often tied to a notion of the student as separated from her history, culture, and language. We have called this the discourse of the 'decontextualised learner' (Boughey and McKenna, 2015) and have shown how it has been dominant in a number of institutional documents. This discourse, we argue, understands poor throughput and retention rates largely in terms of problems inherent in the student herself. So she is not understood as a social being bringing with her a range of literacy practices which may or may not be valued in the academy, but rather she is understood to perform well or not because of her levels of motivation, cognition, or language abilities.

Given the failure of the academy broadly to acknowledge the profound nature of the shifts expected of some students as they enter higher education and engage with academic study and, even worse, the field of academic development's misappropriation of terms which do acknowledge the social in reading, writing and learning, is it surprising that students then name their alienating encounters as colonial or, given the unjustly structured nature of South African society, as 'white'?

This is not to suggest that the disciplinary norms of knowledge construction are not vested in the interests of particular groups. While many of our 'ways of being' in the academy emerge from specific disciplinary values that allow the university to be a place of 'powerful knowledge' (Young, 2003), this is not a neutral process. There is much that can be contested in our institutional and disciplinary knowledge systems which reinforces the 'knowledge of the powerful' (Young, 2003, Young and Muller, 2013). Teaching in ways that act as if knowledge is neutral and the acquisition of academic literacy practices is a-political prevents us not only from supporting students in the identity work required to acquire the powerful knowledge but also absolves us of critiquing such knowledge and practices.

Conclusion

Our argument that such issues are linked to current protests needs a few provisos. No discussion of the protests which looks at a single issue can account for the widespread and violent form they have taken (Luescher et al., 2016). The student protests have emerged from myriad complex factors and it is not our contention that the ways in which literacy practices

have not been made sufficiently accessible and open to critique in our universities is the central aspect, simply that it is one part of a bigger picture. Nor is it our contention that universities have been entirely ignorant of the ways in which the acquisition (and critique) of literacy practices are central to the epistemological access sought by students. Indeed, a number of academic development practitioners and academics in disciplines have worked hard to ensure that such critical access is the right of all students who enter the university gates. But the ongoing dominance of the autonomous model is implicated in current events. The understanding of academic literacy practices as neutral and the concomitant construction of our students as decontextualised sits alongside the anger about the rise in fees and decreased state subsidy, broad political instability, and frustrations about ongoing social inequality.

Key to our argument is an understanding that the reading and writing practices of the university are profoundly social involving the development of particular identities. This is significant for all of those teaching in higher education. First and foremost, it requires us to engage with the theory, a wealth of which has been developed within South Africa. We have to be in a position where we can challenge the dominance of common-sense assumptions that underpin so much of our work and to do this will require serious reflective and theoretical work. Secondly, it requires us to embark on a learning journey that entails moving beyond the comfort zones of teaching what we have been taught. Having spent decades becoming experts within a specific theoretical approach replete with its own subtle literacy practices, we find ourselves having to engage with other possibilities and new ways of being. Most significantly, this has implications for those working in staff and student development (Quinn, 2012, Vorster and Quinn, 2016) who have to find ways of supporting those engaged in making the powerful knowledge promised by the university accessible to *all* who enter.

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