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Academic literacies and the question of knowledge

ABSTRACT

This conceptual paper attempts to map the terrains of academic literacies work as it has evolved over the past twenty or so years in South Africa. In mapping these terrains, one of the areas the paper considers is how the dominant 'skills' Discourse continues to frame the way in which academic literacies work is implemented in South Africa. Drawing on the New Literacies Studies the paper also explores how academic literacies as a body of work defines itself, as well as the range of conceptualisations that inform such definitions. The paper then turns to a consideration of how different contextual agendas drive academic literacies work in different ways across the higher education sector in South Africa. The paper then goes on to explore the different frameworks that academic literacies work in South Africa draws on to theorise this field, as well as some of the premises underlying our thinking and informing our practices, such as: generic and disciplinary-specific approaches to academic literacies development; the role of collaborative partnerships between academic literacies and disciplinary specialists; and how to shift from tacit knowledge of the norms and conventions of disciplines to explicit teaching of these norms and conventions.

Drawing on academic literacies research emanating from the United Kingdom, the paper then argues for a shift from normative to transformative approaches to the development of academic literacies in South African higher education. Finally the paper turns to the question of knowledge and its place in debates about how to develop academic literacies. My conclusions point to the need for a shared ontology within which to frame academic literacies work and research in South Africa. I am suggesting that by placing knowledge at the centre of how we understand our work, we might move closer to such a shared ontology.

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1. Introduction

In this special issue authors are challenged to reflect on, what the editor has termed, 'academic literacy interventions' in South African Higher Education. My reflection took me back twenty years, when as a new academic I first encountered the notion of academic literacies. At that stage a 'skills' Discourse (Gee, 1990) dominated understandings of academic literacies at the institution where I worked and, I would argue, at most higher education institutions in the country. This 'skills' Discourse influenced understandings which saw academic literacies as lists of skills (related to writing and reading and often studying) and gave rise to practices that sought to teach such 'skills' through generic academic literacy courses separate from the mainstream curriculum. Although the past twenty years have seen some significant shifts in understanding among academic literacy practitioners (Jacobs, forthcoming) and more generally in academic development work (Boughey, 2010) the 'skills' Discourse continues to dominate the way academic literacies is talked about in higher education in South Africa. This 'skills' Discourse also continues to frame the way in which academic literacies work is implemented in South African Higher Education and limits its transformative potential. This points to one area in the field where 'we are not yet doing it right', and there are a number of other areas that academic literacies work in South Africa needs to consider in greater depth, and I will turn to each of these now.

2. How academic literacies defines itself

The body of work referred to in the literature as the New Literacy Studies offers us a range of conceptualisations of this much maligned and often contested term *academic literacies.* A common understanding that still dominates thinking in higher education in South Africa, and a (mis)understanding in my opinion, is one that sees academic literacies as a description of the lists of atomised things (skills) that students need to be able to do in academia. Another common (mis)understanding, that underpins many academic development practices in South Africa, is one that sees academic literacies as an autonomous module or subject or course that is taught in higher education. Yet another understanding sees academic literacies as a pedagogic approach to teaching, and arising from this conceptualisation Lea and Street (2006) offer three overlapping models or orientations to the teaching of academic literacies: a *study skills model*; an *academic socialisation model*; and what they term an *academic literacies model*. In my work in this field in South Africa I have encountered all of these models, and there seems to have been a shift in the last twenty years, away from the *study skills* model (which sees literacy as an individual cognitive skill and focuses on language forms) towards the *academic socialisation* model (which sees literacy as acculturating students into disciplinary discourses and focuses on disciplinary genres). However, there appear to be few examples of what Lea and Street (2006: 227-228) refer to as the *academic literacies* model, which 'is concerned with meaning making, identity, power and authority and foregrounds the institutional nature of what "counts" as knowledge in any particular

academic context'. Lillis and Scott (2007) offer a slightly different understanding of the term, and see academic literacies as a critical field of enquiry with a specific epistemological and ideological stance. They describe the epistemological stance as *literacy-as-social-practice*, with a shift in emphasis away from texts towards practices; and the ideological stance as *transformative,* emphasising a shift away from normative approaches which seek to induct students into disciplinary discourses and genres uncritically. The range of understandings outlined above abounds in academic literacies work in South African Higher Education and there seems to be a need for clearer definition and theorisation of this work. This suggests a need to map out what academic literacies as a field of enquiry might look like in the South African higher education context, which brings me to the issue of how our different contextual agendas drive academic literacies work.

3. Differing contextual agendas

Different contextual agendas drive academic literacies work in different ways across the higher education sector. In South Africa this work appears to be driven by an agenda to widen access to higher education; however the issue of *what kind of access* is never really fully explored in academic literacies work, neither is the issue of *access to what*. In some cases this work involves formal access to a university education and to particular higher education programmes, while in other cases this access goes beyond formal access and includes what Morrow (2009) refers to as *epistemological access*, which refers to access to knowledge and to the *'goods'* of the university. In some universities in South Africa the academic literacies agenda is underpinned by issues of social justice and a desire to contest the practice of separate, generic language classes for so-called 'deficient students', while at other universities such practices are the norm. These contextual nuances are played out in the different institutional spaces where we situate our academic literacies work, and often pull us in very different directions both theoretically and in our academic literacies practices. The different contexts in which we work also highlight different sets of enabling and constraining factors impacting on academic literacies work. These enabling and constraining factors point to the need to shift the research lens from micro to macro level analyses of academic literacies work. The challenge here is to piece together the macro higher education picture, by asking questions such as: *What at a macro level allows transformative academic literacies work to prevail in some contexts and not in others*? Another area we should be exploring in our research endeavours is the nature of disciplinary structures and the ways of knowledge-making which make some academic spaces more conducive to academic literacies work than others.

4. The frameworks we draw on

Academic literacies work in South Africa draws on a range of conceptual frameworks to theorise this work (and here I might mention that this work is often untheorised, drawing

on common sense understandings of the development of academic literacies). A review of the conference proceedings and special issues arising from just the Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa (HELTASA)[1] and the Southern African Applied Linguistics Association (SAALA) conferences over the past twenty years demonstrate this range. Both of these national conferences have traditionally had a strong academic literacies stream and the papers and presentations within this stream have tended to draw on frameworks such as New Literacy Studies, Genre Theory, and English/Language Studies in the main. This, in my opinion, points to another area in the field where 'we are not yet doing it right'. We need to find some commonality across the range of conceptual frameworks and analytical tools that we are using to theorise our work. This would make for a more powerful positioning of academic literacies work in South Africa. Some of the frameworks we have been drawing on appear to be incommensurable, while others have more synergy. For example, frameworks that view language as sets of generic reading and writing skills which can be unproblematically transferred from one context to another, would be incommensurable with frameworks that view language as social practices embedded in particular contexts. Yet we find academic literacies researchers and practitioners in South Africa drawing on both these sets of understandings.

On the other hand there are numerous international examples where researchers have drawn on different conceptual orientations to theorise different aspects of their work, such as *Rhetorical Genre Theory, Activity Theory* and *Situated Learning Theory* (Brent, 2011), and *Systemic Functional Linguistics and Academic Literacies* (Coffin & Donohue, 2012). In my own work (Jacobs, 2007) I have found it useful to bring together insights from both *Rhetorical Genre Theory* and *New Literacy Studies*. Although drawing on different bodies of knowledge to theorise academic literacies work allows for richness and a variety of interpretations, it also limits articulating this work in powerful ways. This points to the need for a common language of description through which shared meaning-making can be made about academic literacies research in South Africa. However, to reach a common language of description and shared meaning-making we need to interrogate some of the premises underlying our thinking and informing our academic literacies practices.

5. The premises underlying our thinking

If academic literacies research in South Africa wants to present itself as a theoretically coherent body of knowledge, then we need to interrogate some of the premises underlying our thinking and informing our practices. For example, the extent to which *text* is privileged above *practice* and vice versa, has implications for particular pedagogies and research methodologies.

1 Here I include the South African Association for Academic Development (SAAAD) and the South African Academic Development Association (SAADA) which preceded HELTASA.

If we are working from the premise where *text* is privileged above *practice* then the focus of our pedagogy would be on the text itself, as a container of meaning, with scant attention to the practices which surround the text. Conversely, if we are working from the premise where *practice* is privileged above *text* then our research methodologies would be more ethnographic than linguistic. Another premise we need to interrogate is whether we see student populations as *homogeneous* or *diverse* and how this impacts on teaching. For example, if we see our student body as diverse and 'difference' is the norm in our classrooms, there can be no 'standard' forms but rather hybrid discourses which need to be negotiated among students in the classroom (The New London Group, 1996). Then there are also the singular and plural uses of the term academic literacy/academic literacies. For the *New London Group* (1996) the plural form of the term signals a departure from understandings of literacy as a singular national form of standardised (usually English) language, towards multiliteracies which focus on modes of meaning broader than language alone (textual, visual, spatial, audio etc.) as well as socio-cultural practices embedded in a range of contexts, hence the plural form. For Lillis and Scott (2007: 13) although the plural form (*academic literacies)* signals a critical approach with a focus on literacy practices, they acknowledge that there is 'fluidity and ambiguity surrounding uses of both the singular and plural forms'. This is the case in South Africa, where the singular form does not necessarily denote a normative approach with a focus on 'identifying and inducting' students into academic and disciplinary conventions, nor does the plural form necessarily denote a transformative stance and a focus on 'situating and contesting' academic and disciplinary conventions. However, these different premises have huge implications for research and pedagogy and point to yet another area in the field where 'we are not yet doing it right'.

6. From generic to discipline-specific approaches

In the Weideman article, also in this volume, the author takes issue with the view that discipline-specific approaches are 'superior to generic ones', and argues that the field should consider rather 'what is contextually possible and feasible'. While I agree that contextual and logistical considerations can directly affect the design of approaches to academic literacies development, I would argue that we need to continue pushing the boundaries that these constraints impose on us. If constraints such as 'contextual appropriateness and feasibility' are pushing us towards generic approaches then we need to be shifting the research lens, as I alluded to in a previous section, towards an interrogation of those factors at the macro level which allow discipline-specific approaches to be implemented more successfully at some institutions than at others. If we are settling for generic approaches because 'we do not have the luxury or the logistical means to set up highly specific courses' then we are equally not critically considering the students at the receiving end. Although Weideman acknowledges that disciplines are characterised by more than just the themes or topics they cover, citing 'the way they present evidence' as an example, his analysis of discipline-specific approaches focuses on the issue of disciplinary content. This, I would argue, is *not* where the focus should lie. Wheelahan (2007: 648) argues that there is a difference between

disciplinary knowledge and the disciplinary content of that knowledge. She states that 'the content of a discipline is the *product* of the discipline' rather than the 'principles used within the discipline to create new knowledge'. Discipline-specific approaches, I would argue, should be focussing on what counts as knowledge in the discipline, and then making explicit for students the principles through which new knowledge is created. These disciplinary norms and conventions constitute the invisible 'rules of the game', as it were, and making this explicit to students would involve, among other things, a critical examination of disciplinary discourses and genres. Another issue raised by Weideman is, how specific do we need to be in discipline-specific approaches? This would depend on whether we see disciplines as stable or as contested sites. Trowler et al. (2012), in their more recent work, caution against the essentialising of disciplines and argue that disciplines are not static or homogeneous. This has implications for academic literacies work because if we are working from the premise that disciplines are stable then our pedagogy and research will be informed by a position that sees disciplinary forms and practices as generic and static, whereas if we are working from the premise that disciplines are sites of contestation then we will see disciplinary forms and practices as dynamic and situationally contingent. So, how do we *get at* those disciplinary norms and conventions which constitute the invisible 'rules of the game?

7. The role of collaborative partnerships

In South Africa academic literacies specialists still tend to take responsibility for the development of academic literacies at universities and this often results in generic understandings of academic literacies. I have argued that academic literacies teaching should be about making explicit to students the ways in which different disciplines structure their knowledge bases and produce knowledge. This is different across different disciplines, and therefore the approach to the development of academic literacies should involve collaboration between academic literacies and disciplinary specialists. A question that needs to be considered is how far should academic literacies specialists go in such collaborative ventures with disciplinary specialists and over what period of time. The question of time has implications for both lecturers and students. The development of academic literacies is not something that should be confined to the first year. If academic literacies development is conceptualised as a process of inducting students into, as well as contesting academic and disciplinary conventions, then such development cannot conceivably happen by the end of the first year of study. This conceptualisation of academic literacies teaching sees the need to develop a disciplinary identity in students, something which happens gradually, across the entire undergraduate phase of their studies and into the post-graduate phase.

This conceptualisation sees an academically literate student as the goal or endpoint of their studies. This has implications for the collaborative relationships between academic literacies and disciplinary specialists as well. Clearly such relationships also need to extend beyond the first year of study and beyond just one disciplinary specialist. On the issue of how far academic literacies specialists should go in these collaborative

ventures, data from my own research suggests that the level of conceptual complexity of the disciplinary content becomes a variable in determining how far academic literacies specialists can 'transgress' disciplinary boundaries. Odell and Swersey (2003) express reservations about advocating an approach that requires academic literacies specialists 'to venture out into territory that may be unfamiliar' and 'dealing with subject matter about which they know little or nothing'. They emphasise that this process, of bringing tacit knowledge to explicit awareness (discussed in the next section), will take time and patient collaboration between academic literacies and disciplinary specialists. When such time is not invested these collaborations tend to have unproductive consequences, which favour either academic literacies or disciplinary specialists and set up patterns of inequality. Such cases often result in academic literacies specialists playing a 'service' role to disciplinary specialists (as editors of assignments and assessors for surface level language proficiency) or disciplinary specialists being subjected to the missionary zeal of academic literacies specialists who try to convince them to set writing tasks that they value (such as journal and narrative writing) and to simplify the linguistic features of their disciplines so as to make the language more accessible to students. This points to yet another area in the field where 'we are not yet doing it right'. The higher education sector in South Africa needs to invest the necessary time to nurture such collaborative partnerships between academic literacies and disciplinary specialists and faculties need to create discursive spaces within their curricula for sustained collaboration of academic literacies and disciplinary specialists.

8. From tacit to explicit

I have argued elsewhere (Jacobs, 2010) that academic literacies teaching should be about making explicit the norms and conventions of disciplines, as well as opening up curriculum spaces for these to be contested. My research has shown that knowledge of the norms and conventions of disciplines has a tacit dimension, which makes it difficult for disciplinary specialists to articulate, and therefore difficult for students to learn. The data from my research has shown that one of the ways to make this knowledge explicit is through the interaction of academic literacies and disciplinary specialists. This type of interaction requires disciplinary specialists to work within their role as a disciplinary expert, while simultaneously having a critical overview of this 'insider' role, from outside of it. It was in engaging with academic literacies specialists, who were 'outsiders' to their disciplinary communities, that disciplinary specialists found themselves at the margins of their own fields, and were able to view themselves as insiders from the outside, as it were. This perspective started addressing the challenge facing disciplinary specialists, namely that of bringing what they already know tacitly into the realm of overt and explicit teaching. Theorists in the *Rhetorical Studies* tradition argue that while disciplinary specialists much better 'know' the rhetorical processes through which their disciplines communicate meaning, albeit tacitly, language lecturers can much better 'see' this largely invisible process because they treat language as opaque, something to look at (Segal, Pare, Brent & Vipond, 1998). However, this ability to 'see' the rhetorical processes through which disciplines communicate meaning, has led academic literacies

specialists to take on the 'burden of rhetorical persuasion' (Geisler, 1994) and increasing responsibility for making the rhetorical dimension of disciplinary knowledge explicit for students. This approach assumes that academic literacies specialists have 'knowledge' of the rhetorical processes through which disciplines communicate meaning, rather than just an ability to 'see' these rhetorical processes more clearly. I would argue that this assumption is flawed and often leads to a pedagogical position that suggests academic literacies specialists know the rhetoric of disciplines better than the disciplinary specialists themselves. This is something else that 'we are not yet doing right'; getting both academic literacies and disciplinary specialists to own the 'burden of rhetorical persuasion' and redefine their respective roles within the process of making this 'invisible' process explicit for students. My research has shown that when processes of textual analysis are not guided by the disciplinary knowledge of disciplinary specialists, it leads to academic literacies specialists attempting to become 'experts' in the rhetoric of disciplines, which in turn tends to undermine the disciplinary expertise of disciplinary specialists.

The challenge to academic literacies specialists is that rather than inducting themselves into the norms and conventions of disciplines, they could prompt disciplinary specialists to making explicit the rules governing the norms and conventions of their disciplines by asking questions that a novice to the discipline would. This speaks to an expanded role for academic literacies specialists, that of systemically collaborating with disciplinary specialists, and enabling the unlocking of their tacit understandings of the ways in which different disciplines structure their knowledge bases and produce knowledge. In this expanded role, academic literacies specialists might need to challenge existing mindsets while 'treading lightly' on the often incompatible paradigms of the disciplinary specialists. They should also avoid a practice that 'looks in for a brief time on the tacit knowledge that others have acquired over a lifetime', and then tell them what it is (Segal et al., 1998).

9. From normative to transformative approaches

Lillis and Scott (2007) argue for a transformative approach to academic literacies development which would require lecturers to move beyond *normative* approaches that simply identify and induct students into dominant disciplinary conventions. My own research (Jacobs, forthcoming) demonstrates the difficulty that a group of lecturers had in making the shift from normative to transformative approaches. This might be an area requiring further research in South Africa. While the practice of academic literacies teaching in South Africa appears to have moved somewhat from generic approaches to normative approaches, which induct students into the norms and conventions of disciplines, it is the shift to transformative approaches that poses a challenge. Such a shift would require lecturers to open up curriculum spaces where the norms and conventions of disciplines might be critiqued and contested. However, in order to critique and contest such practices lecturers would need to interrogate the 'ways of knowing' in their disciplines, as well as the 'modes' and 'tools' that their disciplines draw on to create disciplinary ways of knowing (Jacobs, forthcoming). This is something 'we are not yet doing right'.

Few of my research participants understood academic literacies development as being about making visible for students the ways in which their disciplines operated as sites of discourse and power. The pedagogy of only one research participant went beyond just giving students access to the 'ways of knowing' in their disciplines, to include how these 'ways of knowing' might be contested. We need to explore what counts as *transformative approaches to academic literacies development* in South Africa. We need to share understandings of *transformative approaches to academic literacies development* and learn to recognise it in the practices of academic literacies and disciplinary specialists. We need a better sense of what pedagogies might result from academic literacies and disciplinary specialists critiquing and contesting disciplinary 'ways of knowing'. The literature does not offer much in terms of transformative pedagogical strategies and this is an area that requires attention in academic literacies work and research in South Africa. Academic literacies specialists need to create spaces within higher education where their pedagogical strategies can be shared, critiqued and theorised from a position which places knowledge at the centre of such debates. Crucial in such debates would be issues such as, the criteria to judge knowledge claims in different disciplines.

10. Academic literacies and the question of knowledge

This brings me to the question of knowledge and its place in debates about how to develop academic literacies. In 1999, when I was first involved in an institution-wide project to develop academic literacies, my colleagues and I understood our task as integrating content and language (ICL). In our conference call back then, we understood ICL as '*Providing access to knowledge through language'*. So back in 2001, we had placed knowledge at the centre of how we understood ICL. The issue of knowledge and its place in academic literacies debates is crucial. It moves us away from dichotomies, such as language and content, and types, such as ICL, towards relational thinking about disciplines and literacies. Studies in the sociology of knowledge have recently been making the case for reinstating the teaching of knowledge, including knowledge about language, at the forefront of considerations of educational practice and policy, and, more specifically, of teaching and researching language and literacy.

Freebody, Maton and Martin (2008: 189) argue for disciplinarity-based language and literacy education and call for 'coherent conceptualisations of how it is that each discipline/ curriculum domain puts language and literacy resources to work in distinctive ways.' This calls for a refocusing of academic literacies specialists on issues of knowledge and disciplinarity. However, as previously mentioned, rather than inducting *themselves* into the norms and conventions of disciplines, they should prompt disciplinary specialists to make explicit the rules governing the norms and conventions of their disciplines by asking questions that a novice to the discipline would. In my own research I have found that this is an area of difficulty for academic literacies specialists. Many of the participants in my study (Jacobs, forthcoming) were uncertain of the questions to ask of their collaborating disciplinary counterparts, and this is another area where 'we are not yet doing right'. Freebody et al. (2008) offer a list of questions to which the answers

more or less define bodies of knowledge. These questions offer useful starting points for a conversation between academic literacies and disciplinary specialists about the nature of knowledge in their disciplines:

- What counts as evidence and reliability in the disciplines in which we are embedding our work?
- What counts as a way of disputing evidence or reliability in these disciplines?
- What is a *Fact*, and what an *Opinion*, and what is the relative significance of each in the disciplines in which we are embedding our work?
- What counts as a so-called '*right'* answer and is there a '*right'* way of getting to one, sufficient that our students can know, and act on the different kinds of knowledge they are confronted with in higher education?

If these types of questions become the new basis for conversations between academic literacies and disciplinary specialists, then such conversations might precipitate a shift from generic to more discipline-specific approaches to academic literacies development. This brings me back to the issue of how specific we need to be in discipline-specific approaches. What are the alternatives to generic academic literacies approaches that are generalised across disciplines and knowledge forms? Freebody et al. (2008: 196) suggest that students 'need to learn the reading, writing, talking, and listening rules of the game for each subject area if they wish to succeed'.

This calls for a rethinking of dominant understandings of academic literacies development in higher education in South Africa. Freebody et al. (2008: 196) further claim that 'disciplinarity-based knowledge and literacy are the touchstones by which students' work is evaluated and their subsequent pathways marked out'. They take issue with approaches that 'over-rely on generic categories of practice and people' and suggest that we need to relook teaching practices that do this:

> The teaching and learning of knowledge, and of the forms of language whose variations embody that knowledge, are defining features of education. To ignore knowledge is to diminish the promise, practices, and social, cultural and economic consequences of education. More specifically, to ignore the implications of different structurings of knowledge is to be satisfied with universalist solutions that will continue to fail some learners in some communities, workplaces, and societies (Freebody et al., 2008: 196).

This then is the challenge to academic literacies and disciplinary specialists in South African higher education. If we agree that our students are confronted by different kinds of knowledge as they progress through their university studies, and that these different knowledge forms have different 'rules of the game' as it were, then we might understand academic literacies work as helping our students navigate these different disciplinary and knowledge domains.

11. Conclusion

Earlier in the paper I suggested a need for a common language of description to facilitate shared meaning-making around how we understand academic literacies work and research in South Africa. This might move us towards a shared ontology regarding academic literacies work and research in South Africa. My contention is that our conceptualisations of academic literacies work and research is somewhat chaotic, whether we see ourselves as a field or as an approach. What we lack is a shared ontology within which to frame academic literacies work and research, and a commonly understood language of description through which shared meaning-making can be made. I am suggesting that by placing knowledge at the centre of how we understand our work, we might move closer to such a shared ontology. Achieving this will increase the explanatory power of academic literacies research. Meta-level theorising of current academic literacies research, across different contexts, is needed to move ourselves, as a body of researchers, towards such a shared ontology and ultimately a compelling body of knowledge with the gravitas to reshape dominant approaches to academic literacies development in higher education.

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Gudisa Nyambo - Jenala yo
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iiLwimi - Ibhuku Lokufundisa Ulimi - Tšenale ya tša Go ruta
Polelo - Buka ya Thuto ya Puo - Jenale ya Thuto ya Dipuo -
Ijenali Yekufundzisa Lulwimi - Jena?a ya u Gudisa Nyambo
- Jenala yo Dyondzisa Ririmi - Tydskrif vir Taalonderrig -
Journal for Language Teaching - Ijenali yokuFundisa iLimi
- IJenali yokuFundisa iiLwimi - Ibhuku Lokufundisa Ulimi
- Tšenale ya tša Go ruta Polelo - Buka ya Thuto ya Puo -
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