Elbie Henning and Wilhelm van Rensburg
Department of Curriculum Studies, Rand Afrikaans University

Academic development in writing composition: Beyond the limitations of a functionalist and pragmatic curriculum

ABSTRACT

The focus of this article is two-fold. The authors briefly report on an inquiry into student writing in a two-year Education masters programme and argue for an integrated perspective on the development of scholarship as it interfaces with academic writing. Their thesis on South African students, who use the medium of teaching and learning English as an additional (second or third) language, and who have not been able to attend university on a full-time basis before, need more than language and writing proficiency for successful writing composition (and scholarship development) in their academic careers. They also need critical socialisation, in which they are afforded the opportunity to develop multiple academic literacies and a personal academic identity that values inquiry. A premise of the argument is that this process cannot be facilitated incidentally in the typical functionalist and pragmatic curriculum of the 'busy university'.

Key words: academic development; writing composition; New Literacies; academic literacies; writing centre

As universities in South Africa are facing pedagogical realities such as a decrease in face-to-face contact, and an increase in student numbers, with an expected increase in student throughput at the same time (National Department of Education, 2001), the need for academic development of individual students may become blurred with a new discourse and despair at the enormity of the task at hand. Given the harshness of this scenario for already burdened institutions, it comes as no surprise when teachers in higher education start commenting in the halls of the academy, muttering that the demand for academic development will increase and facilities will not, that there is no longer time for tutorials and intense discussion and nurturing of academic identities and that the best way to get through the curriculum is to compress it, to trim it to its bare essentials and to encourage students to work on their own. In effect this means a *functional curriculum* (the students must make some observable progress, especially in the development of skills) and a *pragmatic curriculum* (the students must learn to do what they need most for the moment and the context in the world of work). Both of these views, we argue, resonate with notions of learning that are traditionally not supposed to be spoken in the free halls of the university as institution of liberal education, where the process of learning and appropriating the

discourses of higher education, such as critical thinking and continuous inquiry, cannot be coupled in the same equation with functionalist and pragmatic thought.

Thus, we posit, if students who enter university at this juncture are not afforded the opportunity to develop an academic identity, one that critiques the institution and brings to its space the students' reality as well, the university will eventually cease to be a place where knowledge is generated and assessed for richness, beauty and for use (Caspar, 2000) and it will become a job training institution. We propose that as much as possible of the liberal education dream remain intact in the curricula and in the discourse, and, like Henk Kroes, we plead for the advancement of scholarship and critical thinking by means of specific academic development ventures. We propose that the development of an academic identity (Ivanic, 1999) for each student who successfully passes through the years of academic apprenticeship (Brown, 2000) is the pinnacle of education and that "academic literacies" are the building blocks towards this identity (Street, 2000). In the South African context, with its great inequalities in education, this will not be possible without finely tuned academic development initiatives, one of which, we propose, is the faculty's local writing centre, where language, thinking, support, peer support technological competence and critical thinking may meet (Bean, 2001 and Dysthe, 2001).

We thus argue for an integrated perspective on the development of scholarship as reflected in academic writing and see a writing centre at faculty level as a mechanism to facilitate this. Our thesis is that mature Black South African students – who are the majority of the members of this and many other of our learning programmes in Education which we inquired into – have to face the impact of their past education when they enter a programme that requires advanced academic literacies (Lea & Street, 1999 and Street, 2000). Most of the students in our research sample of seven members said that they had previously been exposed to a system of higher education in which inquiry and the nurturing of scholarship were not encouraged, and that they feel they remain at a disadvantage in terms of their academic development, because of this history.

Theoretical framework

Our inquiry was founded on two main sets of theories. Firstly we based our work on the literature coming out of the New Literacies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000) movement and Street and Lea's model of "Academic Literacies" (Lea and Street, 1999, Street, 2000).

Additionally, we invoked theories of social constructivist learning (Bredo, 2000; Brown, 2000, Lemke, 2000, Gergen, 2001; Kozulin, 1992 and Rogoff, 1990). These theorists emphasise the role of learning with and through peers and other mediators, but also by way of artefacts (writing – and also reading – artefacts in this case) and in a specific sociocultural context, as has been explored by Geertz (1973). They also see the role of "language games" in a discourse community as forwarded by Wittgenstein (1953, in Howe and Berv, 2000: 23). From both an anthropological and a language philosophical viewpoint, the situated learning (situated cognition – Brown, 2000, Brown, Duguid & Collins, 1989) and the networked learning (or disturbed cognition – Salmon 1999, Nardi, 2000) of learners are illuminated by context and existing "language game rules' or existing cultural factors. Thus, we argued, the students who had entered this programme, and who had previously mostly learned to reproduce texts and not to create or generate text, and who also had developed a personal model of academic writing and being as one of good reproduction techniques, were at a disadvantage.

MODELS OF STUDENT WRITING IN HIGHER EDUCATION
(Adapted from Lea and Street, 1999)

STUDY SKILLS
assumptions: Student writing as technical skills and instrumental 'atomised' skills; surface language, grammar, spelling; pathology
critique: Autonomous model; reductionist
courses: College Composition; Remedial Classes
aims: 'Fix it'; remediate; 'basics'
sources: Behavioral Psychology; training

ACADEMIC SOCIALISATION
assumptions: Student writing as transparent medium of representation; focus of student orientation to learning and interpretation of learning task, e.g. 'deep' and 'surface' learning.
critique: assumes one 'culture'; doesn't focus on institutional practices, change, or power; misses rhetorical features of writing.
courses: Writing Support; Study Skills
aims: Inculcating students into new 'culture'
sources: Social Psychology; Anthropology; Constructivism

ACADEMIC LITERACIES
assumptions: Literacies as social practices: at level of epistemology and identities; institutions as sites of/constituted in discourses and power; variety of communicative repertoires, e.g. genres, fields, disciplines: writing as rhetorical activity embedded in different disciplines/discourse communities; student writing as constructive and contested.
courses: Writing taught within disciplines as well as generic courses on language/writing awareness.
aims: facilitate reflexivity/language awareness e.g. re switching in linguistic practices, social meanings and identities, disciplinary comparisons
sources: 'new Literary Studies'; Critical Discourse Analysis; Systematic Linguistics; Cultural Anthropology; History of Education

Howe and Berv (2000: 23) explain by referring to Wittgenstein:

> Individuals are born or "thrown" into linguistic communities. The resources and practices available, which they have no choice about whether or not to learn, are saturated with cultural, historical and social dimensions... Wittgenstein coined the term "language game" as a way of pointing to the rule-governed nature of linguistic practices and to the manner in which people catch on to these rules by actively engaging in such practices. Analogous to Kant's categories, language games are presupposed by the experiences individuals have, not the results of them"

Elsewhere we have discussed the "unravelling of grand narratives" of pedagogy (Daniels & Henning, 1999) and the fossilised use of language (and the concomitant educational discourse and culture), which had become a cognitive prison for the students who reverted to memorised clichés in communication about the content they were studying. Many students got "thrown" into a pedagogy in which the power of the textbook and the lectern were so pervasive that the rules of the language game implied subservient non-critical reproduction and as near to perfect replication as possible, without developing a critical awareness and therefore also an academic identity.

The cohort of students with whom we started on the masters programme in 1997 were not much different to the students referred to above. Not only had they not learned to compose aca-

demic text, based on understanding and insight of sources read and experiences and observations, but they also had not developed a self-concept or an identity of themselves as writers (Ivanic, 1999). We wanted to see, in the inquiry, whether working together on projects, having access to a wide selection of texts, and participating in the coursework and the field experiences would have some impact on their writing.

In trying to understand the role of history in the learning processes and activities of students we include Bredo's (2000: 154) recent analysis of the epistemology of social constructivism, invoking the views of George Herbert Mead. The implications for a 'Meadian' view on social constructivism for education, Bredo argues, are that, "(w)hile later or more specialized developments modify earlier ones as well as create new objects of their own, they do not supplant the earlier ones and must ultimately begin from and return to them". We argue that a course that does not take students back to previous writing and scholarship practices will be suspended in a "cognitive space" (1998). We furthermore argue that the students in the masters course that we investigated were assumed to be competent writers of scholarly text upon registering for the course. We thus say that they were treated unjustly, given the socio-historical context of South Africa, where Black students received a segregated education, determined by a segregated curriculum in both school and higher education before the first democratic dispensation came into being in 1994. The residues of the apartheid system and the strong behaviourist and non-inquiry ethos it engendered in education, would still have to be addressed in working with the student population in this course, 99% of who were mature Black students. To work on the assumption that they would be socialised in to the "language games" of the academy, picking up the skills of writing and scholarship incidentally, we proposed, would be a mistake. In addition to not giving real credence to the nurturing of a personal writing identity, the course would be to revert to a technical view of academic writing as a set of skills only. This would also have the 'goodness' of fit with the functionalist and pragmatic curriculum that we see as a danger to our universities and which we referred to in the title of this paper. For example, students who write in good, functional bureaucratic or corporate style are often rewarded at university by these teachers/lecturers who see this as the style and the genre of the workplace. Teachers who would like to instil argumentative, discursive and analytical language find it hard to convince students to refrain from endless lists of downloaded information, varied only by the type of bullet and numbering.

With regard to the espoused social pedagogy of the program, a pedagogy that we regard as essential for writing development, our argument was that group work per se does not constitute teamwork or a social pedagogy. We had witnessed in the group learning events of a pilot study of this inquiry and another inquiry too (Henning, Mamiane & Peheme, 2000) that the activities did not reveal characteristics of a social-constructivist pedagogy (Henning, 1997 discusses this type of epistemology) of social learning. It did not show signs of mediation and mutual stretching of *zones of proximal development* (Vygotsky, 1978, Henning, 1997). We maintain that physical (or even virtual) 'learning in groups' is no guarantee for deep social learning, as propounded by Gergen (2001). The social character of the learning lies not so much in the composition of the learning group, *per se*, but in all the components of the environment that have been engineered into the design. Thus, social, for us, means distributed, in the sense that Gavriel Salomon (1999) has been using the term for more than two decades now. It also means 'situated' (Brown, 2000) in the present but also in the past of individuals and of groups. Furthermore, 'social' does not necessarily imply 'constructivist'. Groups may work together in a completely non-constructivist way, reflecting strong linear, positivist epistemological overtones. This type of educational environment is not ideal for nurturing academic writing, because it can be argued that it engenders reproduction.

In the case of Black students at a former white institution, social constructivist pedagogies are furthermore complicated by the fact that the cultural images and the languages with which students are trying to appropriate the academy, appear to be strange to its conventions and manners and vice versa[1]. The discourse community is perceived as closed and exclusive to a group that comes in with its own communication and semiotic devices (D'Andrade, 1996, Palmer, 1994), many of which were acquired by the school education and the colleges and universities the students attended. On campus, we suggest, this lead to the following – two opposite views are cultivated by teachers and by students respectively: 1) Teachers see the students as viewed as 'unable'. Lack of writing proficiency is regarded as evidence of inability. 2) Students see writing as one of the components of the academy's exclusivity. The university is seen as a place that requires one to use a tool that is not fully developed and which therefore will prohibit entrance into the academy. We see these two views as an educational stalemate. The onus is on the university to open the communication channel and we propose that academic writing education is one way of doing it. Academic development therefore becomes a way of communication with students.

It is with this claim in mind that we forward a brief report of our inquiry. We believe that acquisition of academic identity is the end of a process of skills development and open socialisation, coupled with a caring environment where students are welcomed into the academy by way of the entire semiotic space. This means that the three-tiered model of Lea & Street (1999) will develop the three components simultaneously. Literacy skills, we argue, cannot be nurtured without socialisation, which cannot grow without personal identity as developing scholar, who learns to inquire and to critique and to cultivate a well grounded point of view and an ability to discuss, debate and analyse from a sound theoretical position (Grabe and Kaplan, 1996).

The inquiry

In the research that we will report on, our aim was to conduct a study in which students' writing progress would be documented over a two-year period. Our objective was to find whether the Masters in Education coursework programme would impact on the students' writing proficiency and their concomitant scholarship development in any marked way, and whether the espoused social constructivist pedagogy of the course was apparent in the writing development. We intended to capture the students' development as critical inquirers, as reflected in their writing and mirrored in their small group discussions (the course designer's notion of a social constructivist pedagogy, which we also took into consideration in the inquiry, although we do not report on it in any depth). Our reasoning was that the students' dependence on advanced academic writing competence for entry into the discourse community of the academy was not sufficiently recognised in the way the curriculum was implemented and in which they had no structured learning opportunities for achieving advanced writing, while remaining mostly dependant on incidental feedback from faculty only.

The sample for the main inquiry consisted of seven purposively selected (Silverman, 2000, Merriam, 1998) students (n=5) who had previously studied at historically Black segregated South African universities. The unit of analysis (Wertsch, 1998), or the unit of inquiry, was activities and events at the interface of students' discourse competence and academic writing proficiency. Their

1. The case would be the same for most first generation university students in a family or a community, regardless of language and ethnic background. In the South African context, however, the planned segregation and the different educational systems did divide people according to race. The students we refer to have been educationally marginalized. By referring to "Black students", this is what we mean.

writing and their communication were meticulously documented over 22 months, using think aloud writing protocols, analysis of student writing artefacts, writing proficiency tests and various forms of interviewing. The research question related to the role of English language proficiency, socialisation for and a critical view of membership of the academy, and the multiple "academic literacies", comprising what can sometimes appear to be, simply, 'academic writing' competence. Thus, although we were focusing on writing, we were also trying to capture data that would reveal the students' views on writing, academic (writing) identity, views on scholarship and their proficiency in English, which is an additional language for them all. We assessed their language proficiency in order to gauge its possible role in their writing competence. We also analysed the curriculum, searching for clues about writing education and the nurturing of scholarship.

We implemented all of these data gathering methods three times during the course of the inquiry, trying to capture their views and competence at the outset, midway through and at the end of the program. The interviews and the writing protocols were video-recorded, and were analysed for content and also for discourse, framing our coding and clustering of data by our knowledge of the "Academic Literacies" model (Lea and Street, 1999) and of social constructivist epistemologies of learning (Brown, 2000, Bredo, 2000). After having worked through each set of data, the findings were reserved until the last set of data had been gathered and analysed. We then began to trace a pattern from the many themes that the data had generated and that we had started to interpret.

Findings and discussion

We found that students' writing competence had not improved, except for the addition of some lexical items that were typical to the discipline. In the interview data it was evident that they had accessed information about scholarly writing, but they could not yet implement the skills in any way. They had, indeed, learned *about* writing for the discourse community and they had expanded their vocabulary, but there was hardly any evidence of improved writing and little evidence of the concomitant argumentation that characterises this form. The curriculum made reference to the teaching of 'academic skills, and mentioned reading, writing and thinking skills, but there was no real evidence about the specific way in which these would be implemented. The students also showed little need for and competence in being socially integrated with the academy. If anything, they continued to see themselves as 'different', with one student expressing it as follows: "Maybe I don't know what I look like if I am a scholar. Maybe it will be that I will be someone else." Another student said, "I am only getting my degree, I don't feel at home and I only know how to behave sometimes. I also think I can't express myself, because this is another language. I know I can't write and I know I will always copy a little, although I am scared to do it."

The findings resonate with the New Literacies movement and with the integrated view of student writing models as conceived by Lea & Street (1999), and also with the views about the development of social science concepts expressed by Lev Vygotsky (Vygotsky, 1992; Kozulin, 1990) and as presented by Bredo (2000). They did not appropriate the concepts of education as presented in the programme, but used some rules of the language games in masters studies to survive, many of them also reminiscent of the "fraudulent" discourse that Henning (1998) has referred to. Thus, we found that the students worked in a social vacuum, where their identity, history and both linguistic and writing competence, were not engineered into the curriculum in any significant way – thereby rendering the position of brief visitors to the academy, but not appropriators of the tools offered by the institution. The curriculum did state one assumption, and that was that the students were 'deficient' and that they need to learn certain skills, which had been listed and which included broadly "reading skills, writing skills, thinking skills". Their learned

resources of language (other than English) their models and their metaphors, their conceptions of inquiry and of writing – none of these were in any way integrated in to the curriculum. On the face of it one would say that they simply did not learn to write better.

However, there needs to be a larger interpretation, in terms of the theory that framed the inquiry. The students were not given much opportunity to appropriate the academy, to 'read' its discourse conventions, to be socialised into ways of doing, while bringing their own (their 'other') along to the venue as resources and not as deficiencies. There was no real sign of significant border crossings, from and towards the academic institution. They also did not have any formalised opportunity to learn the ground skills of advanced scholarly writing, and relied on their earlier experience, namely to mostly reproduce text. According to Bredo (2000: 54), who proposes, "education builds from where one is, utilizing and transforming this base, but not destroying or entirely supplanting it". To us this means that students' writing needs to be nurtured and expanded, not only by teaching skills and by means of socialisation, but by inviting their life-histories into the writing programme, one aspect of which is the use of situated examples, first language expressions (Henning, 1998, Henning, Mamiane & Pheme, 2000) and a clarification of existing writing practice and its genesis.

Firstly we propose that much more research be conducted in student writing at this level. There are few advanced educational researchers in South Africa, and with a major renewal program of education at all levels, expertise in scholarship and its main artefact, scientific writing, are in serious demand. We also propose that existing models of writing instruction be challenged, as many of them still propound a narrow skills-oriented agenda, a purpose that we question by asking what knowledge will be perpetuated and what power bases, including that of the formerly whites only/mostly institutions will be reinforced with such a purpose. We argue that a model that does not explore academic identity development and which does not reflect pedagogy of socio-cultural epistemology, such as the one proposed by Bredo (2000), will continue to educate students to be skilful at one, or perhaps two levels of the "Academic Literacies" model of academic writing that we propose (Lea & Street, 1999).

In the Faculty of Education and Nursing at RAU we are embarking on an intensive writing development programme for all masters and doctoral students, in which we will adopt the principles that have been alluded to in this article: we will assist students to develop advanced academic language competence in a writing (and language) centre that will also be available in online format (and OWL or online writing centre), and which will be linked to the writing centre planned by the Student Services centre (Henning, 2001). In this centre the aim will be to have constant tutoring and workshops in language and literacy skills, but to do so in an integrated or holistic way. We wish to nurture students' identities as scholars by providing them not only participation in the workshops and freedom of access to the writing centre, but also to involve them in the planning and management of the courses, thereby facilitating too a physical appropriation of the academic landscape. We argue that students who are 'programme visitors' to a campus remain outside the academy and are deprived of scholarship, and we do not wish to continue to see students who remain 'the other', and who do not experience border crossings. However, at the same time we see the writing centre as a place of meeting that may also be a crucible for the conventional academic who wishes to remain safely enclosed in the Tower, without relinquishing some of the power of the lectern and adopting the ways of 'the other' academy, such as the use of indigenous languages to explore meaning and contextual depth, the grounding of research in the ontologies of all students and listening to the voices (both in content and in tone) of all students.

Thus, as a significance of this study, we propose that faculties and departments consider moving their boundaries, which is more than 'opening doors for 'the other'. It is also an ontological departure, in which the realities of students, and the realities of the academy are redefined and in which academic literacies become much more than writing.

Conclusion

We set out in this article to argue for a more comprehensive and integrated perspective on the development of academic writing competence, a component of academic development that is held dear by Henk Kroes. We positioned the inquiry within the theoretical spaces of The New Literacies, which advocate an integrated and comprehensive view on literacy beyond skills of language. Added to this we invoked social constructivist epistemology as pedagogical foundation of writing development, emphasising the nurturing of a learning environment where students can come to "be" and not to "receive", and where their languages from home and their images from their communities are celebrated as cultural learning resources – so much so that home languages are invited as discussion medium in classes. In the brief report on the inquiry into student writing we shared the findings that students' writing, and therefore their knowledge and their thinking on the topics, had not changed in any meaningful way. To us this says that we had not paid sufficient attention to a more comprehensive programme of academic development and that we had fallen into the very trap that we are so wary of – the functionalist and pragmatic curriculum that does not, so we argue, engender scholarship and the cultivation of an academic identity. Our students left this course without authorship and thus without voice. At masters level, we believe, that is known as curriculum failure.

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elizabeth henning is professor of educational linguistics in the faculty of education and nursing at rau where she supervises research in language in education. her current research includes inquiry into language and cognition in online learning.		prof. e. henning dept. of curriculum studies rand afrikaans university p.o. box 524 auckland park 2006 eh@edcur.rau.ac.za

wilhelm van rensburg is senior lecturer and teaches methodology of language pedagogy in the department of curriculum studies at rau. he also supervises research in language in education and is currently researching academic writing and identity issues in the postgraduate writing support centre in the faculty of education and nursing.		mr. w. van rensburg dept. of curriculum studies rand afrikaans university p.o. box 524 auckland park 2006 wajvr@edcur.rau.ac.za