

BOOK REVIEW

Wingate, Ursula (2015). *Academic Literacy and Student Diversity: The Case of Inclusive Practice*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters

Reviewed by Thengani H. Ngwenya*

Academic Literacy and Student Diversity (2015) is a book that will appeal to both experts and novices working in the field of academic literacies in higher education. This is not just another textbook on academic literacy but an incisive critique of the often taken-for-granted conceptions of academic literacy and its role in curriculum design and pedagogy. The book is a valuable and welcome contribution to the swiftly growing and reputable *New Perspectives on Language and Education* series. Adopting a scholarly approach that eschews unnecessary jargon, the author provides a wide-ranging and theoretically grounded overview of approaches to academic literacy and successfully dispels myths and misconceptions about academic literacy. By foregrounding disciplinary conventions and practices, the book seeks to promote a truly student-centred approach to higher-education pedagogy. The aims of the book are succinctly and lucidly captured in the book's introductory chapter:

1. To address common misunderstandings regarding students' academic literacy needs, most notably the perception that it is writing only that constitutes the problem; that it is mainly language proficiency that causes deficiencies in writing; and that this problem only affects certain student groups.
2. To examine existing models of literacy/writing pedagogy and consider their suitability for literacy development of diverse student populations.
3. To propose a model of inclusive academic literacy instruction and present an intervention study in which aspects of this model were applied (Wingate, 2015, p. 3).

The book's central thesis is that massification, globalisation, internationalisation and related higher-education policies have resulted in the creation of bewilderingly complex and diverse student populations in various parts of the world. The author argues that contemporary discourses on academic literacy characterised by notions of deficiency and remediation need to be supplanted by new and more nuanced approaches to academic

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literacy instruction. Wingate succeeds in convincing the reader that these approaches need to be transformational and inclusive by moving literacies, in their various forms, from the periphery of disciplinary epistemologies to the centre. The argument that academic literacy should not be designed for the so-called non-traditional student pervades all the chapters of the book, including those that are recognisably theoretical in orientation. The author's intention is clearly to disabuse mainstream academics of the misguided view that academic literacy is a set of reading and writing skills required by students from underprivileged backgrounds in order to cope with the demands of higher education. In this regard, the underpinning philosophy of the book is both egalitarian and transformative. Perhaps the most intellectually exciting section of the book is the chapter in which Wingate outlines the principles of an inclusive model of academic literacy instruction. Writing like the seasoned student development practitioner that she is, Wingate provides practical examples of approaches that have been implemented in a variety of disciplinary contexts. The resources provided, including a comprehensive bibliography on the topic, will be invaluable to researchers and academics teaching in higher education.

Relying on the work of Ochs (1986), Duff (2007, 2010) and other theorist-practitioners, Wingate presents a carefully argued case for the adoption of the language of socialisation and socio-cultural theory as analytical frameworks for interpreting both academic literacy instruction and the systematic and gradual mastery by students from diverse social and academic backgrounds of the defining conceptual basis of university disciplines. For Wingate, being academically literate denotes demonstrable and effective communicative competence in particular academic contexts. Needless to say, this conceptualisation of academic literacy neither equates nor conflates communicative competence with language proficiency or with the ability to write well. Wingate reminds both the specialist and the novice in this area that literacy, especially as the word is used in higher education contexts, is often inextricably linked to the very foundations of what constitutes knowledge in a particular discipline or set of related disciplines. As she explains in this book, academic literacy is understood as the ability to communicate competently in an academic discourse community:

In academic contexts, the social situations and core activities are mainly concerned with knowledge construction, presentation and debate, and accomplished through genres (such as the lecture, the research proposal or the essay). These genres are in turn achieved through contextually appropriate language functions (such as reporting, reasoning, proposing, hedging). (2015, p. 7)

Throughout the book the author presents a compelling argument in favour of embedding academic literacies in disciplinary discourses of which they are an indispensable conceptual and foundational component. The underlying theme of the book is thus both profound and illuminating: teaching academic literacy is not always distinguishable from teaching the content of a particular discipline or subject. Wingate's understanding and presentation of the argument for merging literacy 'skills' with subject content knowledge resonates with the ideas of Lee Shulman, who promotes what he describes as "signature pedagogies"

that derive from disciplinary and professional ways of thinking (Shulman, 2004; Pace & Middendorf, 2004; Gurung, Chick & Haynie, 2009).

The major achievement of this well-researched and eminently readable book is its blurring of artificial boundaries between subject content knowledge and written and spoken language. It is, Wingate argues, the language that provides epistemological access to the facts, procedures, and conceptual foundations of disciplinary and, by extension, professional discourses and “ways of being”.

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