How sufficient is academic literacy? Re-examining a short-course for "disadvantaged" tertiary students

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Abstract

Recent discussions about learning have problematised academic literacy and its place within an increasingly plural, multicultural, multilingual and textually multimodal society. The take up of academic language, once considered central to a 'schooled' and 'intelligent' person, is now, Gee (2004, p.94) argues, "at best a *necessary, but not sufficient* condition for success in society". In light of these comments, we re-examine a successful short-course in academic literacy that was conducted for a cohort of 'disadvantaged' students enrolled in the first year of an education degree (see Hirst, Henderson, Allan, Bode & Kocatepe, 2004). Based on a sociocultural approach to learning and a conceptualisation of tertiary literacy as a social practice, the short-course disrupted deficit views of individual students and helped students expand their literate repertoires. In our re-examination, we draw on Gee's (2003, 2004, 2005) discussions of learning principles in multimediated contexts, including video and computer games, and his preference for the notion of affinity spaces over communities of practice. We begin by reframing academic literacy, then consider whether such a course has the potential to work with the increasing diversity of tertiary students' learning and life experiences while preparing them for successful participation in tertiary education contexts.

Introduction

Our discussion of academic literacy in this paper is centred in the kinds of literacy that are valued by universities, the kinds of literacy that are considered as having high status in our society. Writing is the dominant form of social action in the academy and plays a central role in constructing a particular identity. Judgements are made about students based on their academic writing, and those who do not exhibit mastery of this form of literacy are often considered less able. The focus of much of the research on academic literacy has been concerned with how to socialise students into 'proper' academic practices without being critical of the practices themselves (Ivanic, 1998). The traditional and generally implicit models of academic literacy are often considered benign and neutral. From this viewpoint, they are just a set of skills that students must master in order to perform successfully as 'scholar'. Thus academic literacy is viewed uncritically, and its norms and conventions are considered unitary and monolithic. These models do not take account of the conflicting and contested nature of academic literacies. Neither do they take account of issues of identity and the institutional relationships and authority that are embedded within, and interact with, the diverse student academic literacy practices in and across the university (Lea & Street, 1998).

Despite recent attempts to view academic literacy as a situated practice and as socially constructed and hence more open to contestation and change (Hirst et al., 2004; Ivanic, 1998; Lea & Street, 1998), findings from a broad survey of four Queensland university websites indicate that the dominant model of academic literacy is still a skills-based approach. In these universities, the term 'academic literacy' is strongly associated with academic skills advisers, learning support, or some form of centralised learning centre. And in these contexts, academic literacy is defined as a generic set of skills (e.g., grammar and editing) and types of writing (e.g., essay writing, scientific reports and reference lists) that students need in order to be successful. Procedural guides lead students step by step in the construction of these texts. Academic support courses are often targeted at particular groups, for example, 'under-represented groups' and Indigenous students. This means that academic literacy is constructed within discourses of deficit and remediation. Green, Hammer and Stephens (2005) reported on studies of interviews with academics that supported this conception. That is, the 'problem' is seen as located within students rather than with teaching practices, and these student deficits require remedial intervention from support staff.

Reframing: Academic literacies
Indeed, the term 'academic literacy' tends to restrict us to a singular view of literacy – a particular set of practices. When academic literacy is considered in the plural, as academic literacies, and these literacies are viewed as sets of practices, the focus turns to ways in which students learn to participate and make meaning. These ways of making meaning are valued by the cultures, traditions or academic disciplines with which they are associated. The more specialised these academic disciplines become the more specialised the "ways with words" (see Heath, 1986). These academic disciplines are recognised not only by specialised vocabularies, concepts and knowledges, but also by accepted and valued patterns of meaning-making activity, including genres, rhetorical structures, argument formulations and narrative devices (Rex & McEachen, 1999). As students participate in these disciplines, they learn the specific ways to make meaning as well as to contest meaning. As a result, there are no singular, unified practices that count always and only as academic literacy (Baker & Luke, 1991; Barton & Hamilton, 2000; McHoul, 1991).

Therefore, in describing academic literacy, it is necessary to take account of the ways it is negotiated and reconstituted in historical, cultural and political contexts. In the process of reconstitution, what becomes important is who decides what counts, what gets included and excluded, what is privileged and what is marginalised (Heap, 1985). For students to perform successfully in their university studies, they are required to enter into the academic discourse of particular disciplines (Gutierrez, Rymes, & Larson, 1995). As Rex and McEachen (1999) argued, this means that students have to know "how to engage with and construct texts strategically and procedurally within particular interactional contexts" (p.71). This view is underpinned by the understanding that literacies represent socially developed and culturally embedded ways of using text to serve particular cultural or social purposes. This has significant implications for the learning of literacy by diverse populations of students. Even though these views help us to think about academic literacies differently and about how students engage with them, they do not critique or challenge the assumptions that are made about what *counts* as academic literacies.

Competence with academic language and particular discipline-based reading and writing practices was equated traditionally with being intelligent and erudite. As Gee (2004) explained, academic literacy was central to becoming a 'schooled' and 'intelligent' person and therefore operated as "a significant gate to economic success and sociopolitical power" in society (p.91). Indeed, traditional approaches to academic literacy have tended to focus on ways to help students "adapt their practices to those of the university" (Lea & Street, 1998). In today's world, however, where more students attend universities and most university degree programs have a specific vocational focus, it would seem essential that we re-assess the literacy practices that students might need in their working lives, their public lives as citizens and their personal lives (The New London Group, 1996). We need to question whether university subjects are providing opportunities for students to engage with the literacy practices that are relevant to their societal needs.

Nevertheless, we must be cognisant of the way that students' life pathways will be diverse and often uncertain as they become more active in their vocational, civic and domestic lives (see Department of Education (Queensland), 2000, p.110). It is also important to remember that universities are still the training grounds for higher education and academia and that they must therefore provide opportunities for all students to engage with the particular academic literacy practices of specific disciplines. Academic literacy, then, has not become irrelevant but must be seen as one of a range of literacy practices that students should develop. As Gee (2004) argued, academic literacy is "at best a *necessary, but not sufficient* condition for success in society" (p.94).

As tertiary educators, then, it would seem to be our responsibility to audit the literacy requirements that our students will need for their future lives, whilst recognising that the world is in a constant state of flux and that:

> The very practices, demands and relationships of citizenship, legal rights and responsibilities, and civic participation are shifting in relation to globalisation, debates over national governance and Reconciliation. Cultures and cultural heritages are changing and blending under the influences of new technologies and economies, the knowledge and cultural claims of new and old communities, and those of a highly mobile, increasingly polyglot and cosmopolitan population. (Department of Education, Queensland, 2000, p.111)

This means that an audit of literacy practices should consider the demands of tertiary education, induction into "particular communities of knowledge and practice, real and virtual" in "specific places and global communities" (Department of Education Queensland, 2000, p.111), and the possibilities for new and hybrid texts and new and even presently-un-thought-of literacy practices within a changing world. It seems important to think of academic literacy as something that has to be constantly negotiated and provides students with opportunities to develop flexible literacy repertoires that can morph and adapt to changing conditions.

Re-visiting a "successful" course

In light of these considerations, this paper sets out to re-examine a successful short-course in academic literacy that was conducted for a cohort of "disadvantaged"

students enrolled in the first year of an education degree (see Hirst, Henderson, Allan, Bode, & Kocatepe, 2004). As part of a team of five, we (the authors of this paper) designed, planned and taught a short course called *Apprenticeship in Academic Literacy* at a university in regional Australia. The course aimed to contribute to the equity objectives of the university by increasing the success and retention rates of students from low socio-economic, rural and isolated and Indigenous backgrounds in their early encounters with the academic literacy requirements of their education degree program.

We took a situated approach to the short course by locating it within a core first-year education subject called *Language and Literacies in Education*. Using the set readings and an essay assignment as focus points of the short course, we worked with students on developing reading and writing strategies that would assist them with the learning and assessment requirements of the subject. Our plan was to apprentice the students to the specific literacy practices that were privileged within the core subject. At the same time, however, we wanted students to value the identities that they brought to their studies and to be aware of their own already-existing study strategies.

During the short course, students were involved in a range of oral and print based tasks which were undertaken singly, in pairs, in small groups or as a class. Some tasks relied on students using their own knowledge and pre-existing skills, whilst in others we modelled the exercise first, making our approach explicit. In taking a broad view of literacy as social practice, we used Luke and Freebody's four resources model (Freebody, 1992; Freebody & Luke, 1990; Luke & Freebody, 1999, 2000) as a tool to design and organise the literacy course and to inform our pedagogical practices for developing students' tertiary literacy abilities. We also taught students about the model and how to use it to frame their understandings about literacy in general.

Problematising the course
In view of the discussion in the introductory section of this paper, we are now beginning to question whether the course we conducted had merely inculcated students into the situated practices of a first year education subject, or whether the students' developing literacy practices were helping them prepare for the changing demands of an increasingly globalised and diverse world.

Considering the short course in relation to Lea and Street's (1998) conceptualisations of academic literacy/ies, it would appear that the course fitted the apprenticeship model. Indeed, we named the course an *Apprenticeship in Academic Literacy* and explained that we "constructed students as being apprenticed to a set of specific social practices" which would "enable them to participate effectively in tertiary communities" (Hirst et al., 2004, p.69). Even though we located the course within a socio-cultural frame and argued that academic literacy was "one of the many or multiple literacies that exist" (p.68), we neither critiqued nor problematised the notion of academic literacies. Our approach was one that kept the focus on the students themselves and, as Lea and Street (1998) highlighted, this type of approach is unlikely to provide anything more than limited explanations of students' learning of academic literacies. We treated the conventions of the academic literacy as incontestable, and did not explore other options. For example, we did not consider that the alternative literacy practices and discourses that students bring to the university might eventually

have some effect on academic conventions (Ivanic, 1998). Neither did we encourage them to critically examine and challenge the conventions.

Spaces of learning
In the preceding discussion we have considered the ways in which the teaching of academic literacy is approached in universities. We have argued that, in traditional approaches, academic literacy is separated from disciplines and constructed in terms of skills. This separation is often a 'physical' or spatial one, with learning advisers located in centrally-organised support services and students offered a skills-based model of delivery. By contrast, taking a situated view of literacy foregrounds disciplinary specific practices and the teaching/learning relationship. In this way, deficit views of student diversity are replaced by developing ways for students to participate successfully with the specific literate practices of a community. Such an approach integrates the space of the discipline with the space of literacy. This is evident in apprenticeship models (Greenleaf, Schoenback, Cziko, & Mueller, 2001; Hirst et al., 2004; Rex & McEachen, 1999) and embedded approaches (e.g. Alvermann, 2001; Green et al., 2005). Although these integrated approaches are considered more successful than study skills approaches (Bath, Smith, Stein, & Swann, 2004; Hirst et al., 2004), we argue that both approaches operate with taken-for-granted assumptions about academic literacy. By failing to critique academic literacy, we believe that we are selling students short. Although the learnings that students construct in situated programs are essential, they are, as Gee (2004) argues, "at best a *necessary*, *but not sufficient* condition for success in society" (p.94).

Thinking further about learning
To re-examine the short course discussed above (see Hirst et al., 2004), we decided to consider academic literacy in terms of Gee's (2003, 2004, 2005) critique of traditional schooling. In doing this, we recognised that we were making a deliberate shift towards a consideration of academic literacy/ies within a theory of learning. This move offered a way of thinking about literacy learning within a broader field and of taking the social, cognitive and linguistic dimensions of literacy into account (see Henderson, 2002).

Gee's (2004) approach to situated language and learning developed from his observations that video and/or computer games are places where "young people of all races and classes readily learn specialist varieties of language and ways of thinking without alienation" (p.4). In Gee's opinion, games have much to teach educators about learning. He argues that games – which are long, complex, difficult and sometimes take in excess of 50 hours to play – provide insights into "how to make the learning of specialist varieties of language and thinking in school more equitable, less alienating, and more motivating" (p.4; see also p.57). From these games, Gee extracts a list of learning principles which, he believes, encourages a form of learning that "makes many schools look uninspired and out of touch with the realities of how human learning works at a deep level" (p.75). In turning to new ways of learning within the "high-tech and global economy" (p.4), Gee highlights the necessity for educators to think beyond traditional approaches.

By focusing on learning as a social and cultural process, Gee (2004) argues that "people learn best when their learning is part of a highly motivated engagement with social practices which they value" and that 'space' is a constructive concept for

understanding how learning occurs (p.77). Whilst he acknowledges that the notion of communities of practice has been a useful one in thinking about learning, he identifies its emphasis on belongingness and membership as not-so-useful. Gee argues that the apprenticeship model of learning tends to fix and label the community of practice – the group of experts who have mastered the practice – and the issue becomes one of deciding who is 'in' and who is 'out'. He suggests that, rather than starting with groups, we should start with space, both real or virtual, and consider how different sorts of people use that space.

Spotlighting space

Gee (2004) conceptualises space as having content (whatever the space is about, i.e. the design or organisation of the space) and interaction (the ways that people organise social interactions as well as their thoughts, beliefs, values and actions). "Generators" provide content and include anything that offers meaning (e.g. multimodal signs), whilst access to any space is via "portals" – "places where people get access to interact with the content generators generate" (p.82). In this way he forces us to look at both content and organisation as inseparable elements of learning. By using space as a lens, he encourages us to engage with the dialogical nature of learning and the mutually informing relationship between the 'what' and the 'how', the content and the organisation. He explains this relationship with reference to a particular computer game:

> …the actions of people helping to form the interactional organization of the space as a set of social practices and typical identities can rebound on the actions of those helping to design the content of the space, since the designers must react to the pleasures and displeasures of the people interacting with the content they have designed. At the same time, the actions of those designing the content rebound on the actions of those helping to organize the interaction organization as a set of social practices and identities, since that content shapes and transforms (though by no means fully determines) those practices. (Gee, 2004, p.81)

Drawing on his research of computer games, Gee (2004) uses the notion of 'affinity spaces', a particular type of space, to explain how effective learning can take place. In particular, he identifies eleven features of affinity spaces which are:
1. evidence of a common endeavour (e.g. interests, goals or practices),
2. novices and experts share common space,
3. some portals are strong generators,
4. the content of the space is transformed by the actions and interactions of participants,
5. intensive (specialised) and extensive (less specialised) knowledge are encouraged,
6. individual and distributed knowledge are encouraged,
7. dispersed knowledge (and therefore networking to other spaces) is encouraged,
8. tacit knowledge built up during practice is encouraged,
9. multiple forms of and routes to participation,
10. different ways of demonstrating learning, and
11. leadership is porous and leaders are resources.

<div align="right">(Gee, 2004, pp.85-87).</div>

Examining our course

Gee (2004) offers five questions for considering how the features of a particular space might operate as an affinity space. We use these questions to re-examine the short course that we conducted.

What is the generator (the source of the content)?

In the first year education subject, the content was provided by a book of readings, a study guide, spoken text of lectures and PowerPoint slides. This content was also used during the short course that we conducted and was 'fixed' prior to the course's implementation as we explained in our paper (Hirst et al., 2004). We used the four resources model (Freebody, 1992; Freebody & Luke, 1990; Luke & Freebody, 1999, 2000) to underpin the design of the course and to provide a frame for students to engage with literacy. We asked students to be explicit in the tools they deployed, with the central tool being the four resources model.

The common endeavour (Feature 1) that characterised this space was a common interest and desire for all participants to be successful in writing an academic essay as an assessment item in the core subject. Although we acknowledged and encouraged students to draw on their tacit and explicit background knowledge, this knowledge was not used as a generator. The students were learning how to master the content that we had decided was important. There was an underlying assumption that *we* knew what content was important for the students and we did not contest that assumption (Feature 8).

What is the content and interactional organisation of the space?

The course was designed to apprentice the students to appropriate the voices privileged in the core subject. This meant that the content was organised in ways that made the available designs replicable by the students, thus inculcating them into the practices of the academy. Additionally, the students were encouraged to use their background knowledge as a springboard to learn new (but privileged) ways of doing things. However, that background knowledge remained in the background, rather than helping the students to re-design the practices of the academy.

In terms of interactional organisation, the course participants were organised into groups. Each group comprised a tutor, a support tutor (third year education student) and up to 10 students. Students interacted with the four resources model individually, in pairs, in small groups, or as a whole group. Although we provided opportunities for all students to interact within this space in a range of ways, *we* decided in advance which interactional organisation would be used and when. We did not allow multiple forms and routes to participation (Feature 9).

Nevertheless, we did offer participants the opportunity to take up different roles within the group. As teachers, we saw ourselves primarily as designers and enablers, rather than taking up authoritarian leadership roles. We did not insist on compulsory attendance and the size of the groups allowed us to conduct the course in an informal interactional format (Feature 11). In this context, students began to see themselves and us as part of a various communities of learners. These communities continued to evolve and address new goals in other education subjects (see Hirst et al., 2004, p.74) (Feature 7).

How do content and interactional organisation reflexively shape each other?
The way the content was organised and designed shaped the way that students and tutors engaged in and used various literacy practices, enabling students to develop a repertoire. Additionally, these practices shaped and re-shaped the content, because the course encouraged students to interact as code-breakers, meaning-makers, text users and text analysts (Freebody, 1992; Freebody & Luke, 1990; Luke & Freebody, 1999, 2000). This, in turn, re-shaped how students engaged with the literacies of the course.

What are the portals that give students access to interactions with the signs?
The short course was a portal for only some of the students who were enrolled in the first year education subject. Some students were segregated from others. Those with more expertise were not expected to join the course. Even though students self-selected to participate, it was explained that the course was aimed at 'disadvantaged' students, as determined by the requirements of the university equity funding scheme. Although the students, who were constructed as novices, and the tutors, who were constructed as experts, shared a common space, it was assumed that learning was the job of the students and teaching was the job of the experts (Feature 2).

The purpose of the course was to give students access to specialised signs associated with an academic discipline. Furthermore, the course also focused on assisting students to learn some less specialised knowledge that would enable them to transfer strategies, such as note-making practices, identifying topic sentences and making margin notes, to other discipline areas (Feature 5).

In asking students to explicitly discuss and identify the tacit knowledge they used to accomplish academic reading tasks, they made this knowledge available to all participants. This content provided a portal for other students, thus encouraging the development of both individual and distributed knowledge (Feature 6).

Is the generator also a portal and is the portal also a generator?
One of the generators in our course was the four resources model which became a portal for accessing and understanding how texts work. As we argued earlier, we used the model as a tool to design and organise the literacy course and to inform our pedagogical practices for developing students' tertiary literacy abilities. This enabled students to use the model as both content and as a way of framing their understandings about literacy in general (Feature 3).

Gee (2004) asks whether a portal is also a generator. In other words, can students "change the sign system (content) with which the class is interacting in any serious way?" (p.83). In the case of our course, and as we have demonstrated throughout this paper, the answer would be no (Feature 4).

Conclusion
Our brief examination of a short course for first year tertiary students addressed the framing questions posed by Gee (2004) in his discussion of the features of affinity spaces. We found that our course fell short. Although it had some of the features that Gee advocates for enhancing motivation and engagement in learning, other features were clearly absent. The generator or content was not negotiable within the course we

offered. Despite our best intentions and the implementation of a situated model, we still tended towards a more traditional approach to academic literacy, focusing on ways of helping students adapt their practices to those of the university. This inculcated students into the situated practices of their first year degree subject, without giving them the opportunity to contest those practices. This suggests that we may not have prepared them to negotiate the changing literacy demands of an increasingly globalised and diverse world. Whilst the course was necessary for the students to be successful in that particular context, we recognise that it was probably not sufficient in preparing them for success in the broader society. This prompts us to further rethink the teaching of academic literacies.

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