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Defining academic literacies research: issues of epistemology, ideology and strategy

Theresa Lillis and Mary Scott

Abstract

Academic literacies research has developed over the past 20 years as a significant field of study that draws on a number of disciplinary fields and subfields such as applied linguistics and sociolinguistics, anthropology, sociocultural theories of learning, new literacy studies and discourse studies. Whilst there is fluidity and even confusion surrounding the use of the term 'academic literacies', we argue in this paper that it is a field of enquiry with a specific epistemological and ideological stance towards the study of academic communication and particularly, to date, writing. To define this field we situate the emergence of academic literacies research within a specific historical moment in higher education and offer an overview of the questions that the research has set out to explore. We consider debates surrounding the uses of the singular or plural forms, academic literacy/ies, and, given its position at the juncture of research/theory building and application, we acknowledge the need for strategic as well as epistemological and ideological understandings of its uses. We conclude by summarising the methodological and theoretical orientations that have developed as 'academic literacies', conceptualised as a field of inquiry, has expanded, and we point to areas that merit further theoretical consideration and empirical research.

KEYWORDS: ACADEMIC LITERACY; ACADEMIC LITERACIES; SOCIAL PRACTICE;
TRANSFORMATIVE

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1 Introduction

The territory we seek to map is ‘academic literacies’, which has developed as a significant area of study over the past 20 years. In doing so we recognise that this article has two purposes: it is in part an overview of research in what is a relatively young field, and in part a position paper, setting up what this field should be. As with any such activity, we recognise that the ‘the map is not the territory’ (Korzybski, 1958) and that what we are offering as an overview are selective focal points that are based on our particular positions within the academy and the world. We are writing out of a particular geo-historical context: most obviously we are UK based teacher-researchers writing out of higher education, the educational domain which has been the predominant focus of academic literacies research to date. However, we are typical of many in this field internationally in that, alongside interests and experience in the study of language – drawing on applied linguistics, ELT-EAP, education, sociolinguistics and linguistic ethnography – we are driven by a concern to explore the complexities involved in academic communication, and particularly writing, in the face of what are often powerful but restricted and deficit official discourses on (student) language use. We consider it important to recognise the location of ‘academic literacies’ at the juncture of theory and application as this accounts, in part, for the ways in which it is adopted and co-opted for use in many settings, often with a range of meanings – sometimes confusing and contradictory – and sometimes strategic. We view ‘application’ here as a dynamic phenomenon embedded in – rather than separate from – research activity (see Roberts, 2003).

The phrase ‘academic literacy/ies’ in both singular and plural forms is growing in use across research and applied settings. However, there is considerable fluidity – and at times confusion – in meanings attached to the use of the phrase, which cannot be explained in terms of its singular or plural form (we return to this later in the paper). In applied settings, the phrase (singular or plural) is increasingly used to signify courses intended to enable student writers to meet the demands of writing in the university. Such courses can range from instruction in the organisation of paragraphs and the setting out of references, to courses on how to write a dissertation.¹ This instrumental focus is strongly echoed in research which considers specific courses or teaching initiatives in relation to student achievement or students’ acquisition of required linguistic, rhetorical or cognitive structures (Spack, 1997; Newman et al., 2003; Granville and Dison, 2005). Within this instrumental framing the singular and plural forms – academic literacy/ies – are used, even within the same context (of a written research paper or a conference presentation), across a continuum of emphases, key ones being: as a broad descriptor of the writing activities, or

textual conventions, associated with academic study in general (for examples see Greenleaf et al., 2001; Bharuthram and McKena, 2006); as a descriptor of the range of the rhetorical practices, discourses and genres in academia bound up with specific disciplines (for example of an analytic framing see Geisler, 1994); for example of a pedagogic framing (see Goodier and Parkinson, 2005); as qualified in some way, for example to refer to a level of competence or 'acquisition' such as 'advanced academic literacy', used to refer to the writing of doctoral and Master theses generally or in relation to specific disciplines (Journal of English for Academic Purposes, special issue, 2005; Koutsantoni, 2006). Whilst its meaning is sometimes glossed (as in Belcher, 2006) or briefly discussed (as in Hyland, 2005) there is a tendency (in writings and most notably in conferences), to use the phrase (whether in the singular or plural) referentially: that is as referring to reading/writing/texts in academic contexts, rather than as indexing a critical field of inquiry with specific theoretical and ideological historical roots and interests. One key aim in this paper is to carve out a clear space for 'academic literacies' as a field of inquiry with a specific epistemological and ideological stance.²

We begin by considering the geopolitical and historical context in which this specific field of inquiry has developed and which to a large extent accounts for the emphasis on *writing* rather than reading or other academic communication practices, and in particular the focus on students' writing. We move on to consider how academic literacies constitutes a specific epistemology, that of *literacy as social practice*, and ideology, that of *transformation*. We consider what may be at stake in using the singular or plural forms, academic *literacy/ies*, and, given its position at the juncture of research and application, acknowledge the need to engage with strategic as well as epistemological and ideological uses. We conclude by pointing to areas that merit further theoretical consideration and empirical research.

2 Why the emergence of academic literacies? Responding to deficit discourses in the context of an expanding higher education system

Academic literacies in the UK has emerged from predominantly teacher-researcher recognition of the limitations in much official discourse on language and literacy in a rapidly changing higher education system. The institutional context is one of expansion of higher education and increasing participation of both 'local' and 'international' students. The former development is part of an official 'widening access' agenda and represents a move away from a highly exclusive system, in which the participation rate of 18–20 year-olds was still

only 15 per cent in the mid 1980s to a more open system in which over 30 per cent of that age cohort had gained access by the mid-1990s. Current UK government policy is to increase the participation rate of 18–20 year-olds to 50 per cent in the near future, a participation rate which would conform to Trow's criteria for a universal system of higher education (Trow, 1973, cited in Scott, 1995). Alongside the increasing participation of 'local' students, there has been a significant growth in students from around the world, 'international students', reflecting the drive towards the globalisation of 'centre' higher education institutions (for centre/periphery framings, see Wallerstein, 1991). In the UK, for example, international students constitute 13 per cent of the total student population, and 36 per cent of postgraduate research students (<http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/>, accessed 17 July 2006).

The increase in the numbers of students participating in higher education and the linguistic, social and cultural diversity that they bring to this domain has been accompanied by: a) public discourses on falling standards, with students' written language often being treated as emblematic of falling standards more generally;³ and b) minimal official attention to language in higher education pedagogy – in policy and curriculum documents, as well as in the research interest in teaching and learning (see discussions in Lillis and Turner, 2001; Haggis, 2003; Lea, 2005). Thus whilst there are policy shifts towards expansion, and diversity is rhetorically celebrated in mission statements, diversity as a fundamental dimension to communicative practices is often viewed as problematic. In relation to the specific interest of this paper, 'language' and 'literacy' tend only to become visible institutionally when construed as a problem to be solved through additional or remedial support, when, as Street states, 'variety' is viewed as 'a problem rather than resource' (Street, 1999: 198). Confronted by deficit framings and unconvinced by public and official discourses, many teacher-researchers in higher education with a responsibility or interest in language based pedagogy – in the UK and elsewhere – have sought out and engaged in research and theorisations of language use which take account of the complex contexts in which they/we work, as we discuss in more detail below.

The link between policies of expansion and inclusion and high profile debates about language and literacy issues in the UK mirrors patterns in other national contexts, either contemporaneously or at other historical moments. Thus, whilst writing provision and related research in the form of 'composition' has been part of US academic debate for more than a century, debates and research exploring diversity of language and literacy practices grew notably in the US from the 1970s onwards, following open access policies which led to the participation of large numbers of students historically excluded from university (Rose, 1989; Crowley, 1998; Horner and Lu, 1999). A more recent

example is the South African context of higher education, where following the end of Apartheid and the democratic elections of 1994 there was a radical reorganisation of the racially stratified university system, notably the opening up of historically 'white' universities to 'black' students for the first time. Such massive social transformation drives the agenda of practitioner driven research focusing on both understanding what is at stake in students' language and literacy practices and in questioning of the value of dominant academic practices (Angelil-Carter, 1998, 2000; Makoni and Meinhof, 2003; McKinney and van Pletzen, 2004; Thesen and van Pletzen, 2006).

Student writing – rather than other language or literacy activities – has been at the top of the language agenda in expanding higher education contexts, both in public outcries and in teacher-researcher responses. The reason for this is an obvious one: students' written texts continue to constitute the main form of assessment and as such writing is a 'high stakes' activity in university education. If there are 'problems' with writing, then the student is likely to fail. Clarifying the nature of the 'problem', however, is far from straightforward and for this reason it is the definition and articulation of what constitutes the 'problem' that is at the heart of much academic literacies research, involving critical and empirical exploration not least of the following questions: what is the nature of 'academic' writing in different sites and contexts?; what does it mean to participants to 'do' academic writing?; how are identity and identification bound up with rhetorical and communicative practices in the academy?; to what extent and in which specific ways do prevailing conventions and practices enable and constrain meaning making?; what opportunities exist for drawing a range of theoretical and semiotic resources into academic meaning making?

3 'Academic literacies': articulating an epistemology and ideology

In exploring what is involved and at stake in student writing, teacher-researchers have drawn on the available and influential paradigms in their specific geo-historical contexts. Thus research and debate in the US, where the explicit teaching of writing has a well established institutional presence, is informed by a number of key disciplinary and epistemological frameworks: for example, 'freshman composition' (compulsory writing classes for undergraduates) research writings are strongly influenced by theories from literary and rhetorical studies (see Berlin, 1988; Bizzell, 1992; Schlib, 1996; Ede, 1999); 'basic writing' (writing courses linked to open admission policies in the late 1960s and 1970s) research often draws on cultural studies and post-colonial frameworks (Lu, 1994; Horner and Lu, 1999); programmes aimed at developing writing across and within the curriculum (WAC and WID) draw on sociocultural theories, such as neo-Vygotskian notions (see Flower, 1994), activity theories and communities of

practice (see for example Russell, 1997, 2002). In contrast, in Australia, explicit focus on student writing in higher education is a more recent phenomenon and has been powerfully influenced by one specific linguistic approach, systemic functional linguistics (see Skillen, 2006; for critical discussion see Aitcheson and Lee, 2006), and to a lesser extent New Literacy Studies (Candlin and Plum, 1998). In the UK, until recently, student academic writing tended to remain invisible as an object both of pedagogy and research. The most visible frame of reference has been English for Academic Purposes (EAP), with ‘overseas’ or ‘international’ students using ‘English as a foreign language’ at the centre of both pedagogic and research interest; this provision and research is influenced by work in applied linguistics, notably that of Swales and his specific theories of genre and discourse (Swales, 1990, 2004); and by a range of text focused approaches aiming to make visible the textual features of different academic discourses (for example, Hyland, 2000, 2004; Thompson, 2005). Interest in the writing of users of English as a first language was limited until recently, but was evident in some research (notably Hounsell, 1984; Taylor et al., 1988; Andrews, 1995; Mitchell and Andrews, 2000). A more recent official focus, at the level of UK national policy (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education 1997), has been the academic writing of all students as one of many ‘study skills’ that they are expected to acquire. Where discussed at all, approaches to the teaching and learning of such skills are embedded either in psychological theories of teaching and learning, in which language is notably absent (see discussions in Lillis, 2001; Ivanič and Lea, 2006) or in expressionist theories of writing and composition (as reflected in the Royal Literary Fund report 2006; see also discussions in Ivanič, 2004).

3.1 Epistemology: a critical ethnographic gaze

Whilst many of the research approaches referred to above adopt what can be broadly described as a socially oriented approach to writing, what marks out those which can be characterised as adopting an ‘academic literacies’ approach, is the extent to which *practice* is privileged above *text*. The ‘textual bias’ (Horner, 1999) – that is the treatment of language/writing as solely or primarily a linguistic object – is evident in the public outcry against standards of student writing referred to above, but also in a number of apparently quite distinct academic traditions of language study, whether texts as instances of genre (as exemplified differently in the work of Swales, 1990, 2004; Martin, 1993), or particular traditionally demarcated rhetorical modes (see discussion in Petraglia, 1995). One important consequence of pre-identifying the ‘problem’ as textual is that it leads to pedagogy and research which takes text as the object of study which

in turn leads to policy and pedagogical ‘solutions’ which are overwhelmingly textual in nature.

Academic literacies research has challenged this textual bias by shifting the emphasis away from texts, towards practices, drawing on a number of traditions; New Literacy Studies informed by anthropology (see for example Street, 1984, 2003; Baynham, 1995), critical discourse studies (notably the work of Fairclough, 1992, 1995) and the sociology of knowledge (Latour and Woolgar, 1986). This is both a theoretical and a methodological move and is well illustrated in the work of Brian Street, an influential figure in the UK and internationally, who explicitly brings an anthropological stance to the study of student academic writing. At a theoretical level, his contrasting notions of autonomous and ideological positions on literacy in general provided a useful heuristic for opening up a critical exploration of the specific literacy demands and practices associated with academia. Rather than the dominant position on literacy as autonomous – whereby literacy is viewed as a single and universal phenomenon with assumed cognitive as well as economic benefits – Street has long since argued for what he calls an *ideological* model of literacy – whereby the focus is on acknowledging the socioculturally embedded nature of literacy practices and the associated power differentials in any literacy related activity (Street, 1984, 2004, 2005).

The principal empirical methodology inherent in an ideological model of literacy is that of ethnography, involving both observation of the practices surrounding the production of texts – rather than focusing solely on written texts – as well as participants’ perspectives on the texts and practices. This ethnographic framing of the study of students’ writing connects strongly with, and indeed gives academic credibility to, long standing practitioners’ interest, in adult and higher education, in exploring and making sense of students’ perspectives on academic writing, including challenging the ‘taken for granted’ conventions that they are expected to write within (see Gardner, 1992; Benson et al., 1993; Ivanič and Simpson, 1992; Ivanič et al., 1996; Ivanič, 1998; Scott, 1999; Lillis and Ramsey, 2005). The emphasis on dialogic methodologies echoes recent developments in ‘critical ethnography’ which critically expose issues of social justice and ethnography as rhetorical practice (Brown and Dobrin, 2004).

The notion of academic writing as a social practice encapsulates both the theory and methodology characterising an academic literacies approach. *Practice* offers a way of linking language with what individuals, as socially situated actors, do, both at the level of ‘context of situation’ and at the level of ‘context of culture’ (Malinowski, [1923] 1994) in three specific ways. Firstly, an emphasis on practice signals that specific instances of language use – spoken

and written *texts* – do not exist in isolation but are bound up with what people do – *practices* – in the material, social world. Secondly, that ways of doing things with texts, become part of everyday, implicit life routines both of the individual, *habitus* in Bourdieu's (1991) terms, and of social institutions. Specific instances of language use involve drawing on available – and in institutional contexts – legitimised *representational resources* (Kress, 1996: 18). Here, language might best be understood as *practice-resource* (see Lillis 2001: Chapter 2). For, by engaging in an existing practice we are maintaining a particular type of representational resource; by drawing on a particular type of representational resource, we are maintaining a particular type of social practice. At this third and most abstract level, and in specific relation to literacy, the notion of practice

offers a powerful way of conceptualising the link between the activities of reading and writing and the social structures in which they are embedded and which they help to shape. (Barton and Hamilton, 1998: 6)

In a widely cited paper, in 1998 Lea and Street brought this three levelled notion of practice explicitly to the centre of student academic writing research and used the plural form 'academic literacies' to signal this emphasis. In using this phrase they sought to foreground a critical ethnographic perspective, core elements of which are evident in a number of international research writings (for example, Ballard and Clanchy, 1988; Berkenkotter and Huckin, 1995; Prior, 1998; Dysthe, 2002) but which has set down particularly strong roots in the UK and South Africa. The shift away from a sole or primary focus on texts has helped to foreground many dimensions to student academic writing which had previously remained invisible or had been ignored; these include the impact of power relations on student writing; the contested nature of academic writing conventions; the centrality of identity and identification in academic writing, academic writing as ideologically inscribed knowledge construction, the nature of generic academic, as well as disciplinary specific, writing practices, an interest in an archaeology of academic practices (for examples, see Clark and Ivanič, 1997; Ivanič, 1998; Lea and Street, 1998; Jones et al., 1999; Lea and Stierer, 2000; Scott, 1999; Angelil-Carter, 2000; Baynham, 2000; Thesen and van Pletzen, 2006).

3.2 Ideology: a transformative stance

The ideological stance towards the object of study in what we are calling 'academic literacies' research can be described as explicitly *transformative* rather than *normative*⁴. A normative approach evident for example in much EAP work can be summarised as resting on the educational myths that Kress

(2007) describes: the homogeneity of the student population, the stability of disciplines, and the unidirectionality of the teacher-student relation. Consonant with these myths is an interest to ‘identify and induct’: the emphasis is on identifying academic conventions – at one or more levels of grammar, discourse or rhetorical structure or genre – and on (or with a view to) exploring how students might be taught to become proficient or ‘expert’ and developing materials on that basis (for examples, see Flowerdew, 2000; Swales and Feak, 2004). A transformative approach in contrast involves an interest in such questions but in addition is concerned with: a) locating such conventions in relation to specific and contested traditions of knowledge making; b) eliciting the perspectives of writers (whether students or professionals) on the ways in which such conventions impinge on their meaning making; c) exploring alternative ways of meaning making in academia, not least by considering the resources that (student) writers bring to the academy as legitimate tools for meaning making (examples of pedagogy informed by the latter approach are to be found in Clark et al., 1990; Clark and Ivanič, 1997; Lu, 1994, 2004; Canagarajah, 2002a; Archer, 2006; Lillis, 2006).

It is important at this point to signal two key differences between the significant strand of US based literature which adopts a transformative interest in academic writing and the way in which ‘academic literacies’ as a field has developed in the UK and other national contexts such as South Africa. The first difference is the institutional context: in the UK – in contrast for example with the US – questions about literacy practices are being played out within the everyday business of disciplinary study, not within a specified ‘writing’ designated spaces (such as composition, or basic writing, writing centres, TESOL classes). The second is that in US writings, transformative discussions tend to be forged out of the disciplinary traditions of literary studies and cultural theory and to remain at a theoretical level, with detailed empirical observation often lacking (see Cushman, 1999, for discussion). In attempting to clarify what constitutes an ‘academic literacies’ field of inquiry internationally, we argue that it is a transformative interest in meaning making set alongside a critical ethnographic gaze focusing on situated text production and practice. This involves a commitment to staying rooted in people’s lived experiences and an attempt to explore what may be at stake for them in specific contexts.⁵

4 What’s in a name? Academic literacy/ies

We are using ‘academic literacies’ in its plural form to signal a specific epistemological and ideological approach towards academic writing and communication. However we recognise the considerable fluidity and ambiguity surrounding uses of both the singular and plural forms – academic literacy and literacies-

across research and applied settings which defy any straightforward mapping of the phrase (singular or plural) against definition. It is useful to consider some specific instances of use in order to tease out the key characteristics of what we are arguing here constitutes an ‘academic literacies’ approach. Compare the following three uses in book titles. The first two are early uses of the plural form: a) *Academic Literacies: the public and private discourse of university students* by Chiseri-Strater (1991); and b) *Text, role and context: developing academic literacies* by Ann Johns (1997); the third is a recent example of the singular form; c) *Academic literacy and the languages of change* edited by Lucia Thesen and Ermiem van Pletzen (2006). All three books are concerned to explicate the academic writing conventions and practices with which students are expected to engage. However, key differences can be noted at the levels of epistemological stance which do not in fact map neatly on to the singular and plural forms of the phrase. Books ‘a’ (using the plural form) and ‘c’ (using the singular form) involve a critical ethnographic stance exemplifying the literacy as social practice perspective outlined in the previous section. Their aim is to scrutinise the resources and conventions that are privileged within academia alongside a consideration of the available resources and perspectives of student users. In contrast, Book ‘b’ (using the plural form) is a programmatic approach drawing on genre theory, where the emphasis is on considering how students can learn existing conventions. These differences in epistemological orientation are strongly linked to researchers’ ideological stance or interest which, once again, cannot be mapped neatly against a singular or plural form. Thus books ‘a’ (plural) and ‘c’ (singular) above can be described as adopting a transformative stance in that they are concerned not only to identify conventions but also to problematise them in relation to students’ interests and experiences; in contrast ‘b’ (plural) reflects the ‘identify and induct’ approach evident in much EAP work.

In seeking to identify significant differences in approaches, and what may be at stake in such differences, teacher-researchers therefore need to look beyond singular and plural uses of ‘literacy/ies’ and to consider rather the key tropes that are used; for example, *apprenticeship, socialisation, scaffolding/ novice/ experts* drawn from sociocultural theory and some uses of activity theory and community of practice signal the foundational work researchers are using and can often signal a researcher’s normative interest. Learning and education here is construed as a journey with marked stages and the tutors’ role as being to move or induct students into conventions and practices currently considered to be appropriate (the metaphor of apprenticeship is in widespread use – see for examples, Swales (1990); Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995); Johns (1997); for critical discussion, see Candlin and Plum (1999); Woodward-Kron (2004). In contrast, explicit discussion of power

and authority (Lea and Street, 1998; Turner, 2004) and/or the use of notions such as dialogism, hybridity and intertextuality (Ivanič, 1998; Lillis, 2001) tend to signal a position in which conventions are viewed as contested, meaning making as site of struggle and a researcher-practitioner's interest in identifying the potential value of a wider range of representational resources for meaning making in academia. This transformative interest characteristic of 'academic literacies' approach is evident in some strands of EAP research (Benesch, 2001) and has surfaced in debates surrounding distinctions between 'critical', 'pragmatic' and 'critical-pragmatic' approaches (see Harwood and Hadley, 2004). Of course there is some fuzziness around the extent to which teacher-researchers actually can or do espouse a transformative or normative interest and whether they/we index these interests in their writings or pedagogy through the use of the singular or plural forms. This may in part reflect some theoretical confusion or even ambivalence which we think it is important to resolve (and which we hope this paper goes some way towards). But we also recognise in part it may reflect their/our positions within the academy where they/we often have to juggle strategically with prevailing discourses and values about academic writing and communicative practices in academia more generally.

5 Strategic uses of 'academic literacy/ies'

The strategic dimension to explicit usage of the phrase is illustrated by a debate that has taken place between two scholars: Kress and Street. In part their debate has explicitly centred on the model of language that such singularity/plurality indexes. For example, Kress has argued against the plural form *literacies* in the following way:

If we assume that language is dynamic because it is constantly being remade by its users in response to the demands of their social environment, we do not then have a need to invent a plurality of literacies: it is a normal and absolutely fundamental characteristic of language and literacy to be constantly remade in relation to the needs of the moment; it is neither autonomous or stable, and nor is it a single integrated phenomenon; it is messy and diverse and not in need of pluralizing. (Kress, 1997: 115)

It is interesting to consider that whilst Street does not reject this view of language as fundamentally dynamic or varied, he insists that the plural form *literacies* has a strategic importance:

I think that for strategic reasons it has been important to put forward the argument regarding plurality ... I have found particularly in development

circles where agencies present literacy as the panacea to social ills and the key ingredient in modernization, the dominant assumption has been of a single autonomous literacy that is the same everywhere and simply needs transplanting to new environments. (2003: 80)

The theoretical point made by Kress is clear but Street's comments illustrate well the position of 'academic literacies' as an applied field and, as such, having to face not only research communities but also the institutions where its users work and seek to influence. The teacher-researchers who drive much academic literacy/ies research are usually grappling with the worlds of academic knowledge making on the one hand, and pedagogy, course design and institutional policy making, on the other, and often from marginal institutional positions. They/we are to having to work with(in) prevailing discourses often circulating with contested meanings across stratified institutional structures. And for this reason they/we may adopt both singular and plural forms to index different meanings in accordance with specific participants, contexts and purposes. Thus it is common to find researchers using the plural form in their research writings to signal a transformative social practice approach, but using either the singular or the plural form (or both) in their specific institutional contexts as a way of engaging colleagues in discussions which do not immediately start from the deficit position in much public and institutional discourse. This is a tricky space to navigate as is illustrated by the following website describing 'academic literacy projects' from one UK university:

X's academic literacy projects address the needs of students who are often described as having 'language problems' at University. Academic literacy indicates a fluency in the particular ways of thinking, doing, being, reading and writing which are peculiar to academic contexts. This view of language is different from that adopted by ESL or EFL teaching approaches, in that we are interested in far more than the 'surface features' of grammar and vocabulary in students' language. Instead, our projects address the social and cultural issues which bedevil students' apprenticeship to academic disciplines.

The program is clearly attempting to shift the institution's deficit discourse and in part does this by using the phrase 'academic literacy' which is new in this context to emphasise *fluency in the particular ways of thinking, doing, being, reading and writing which are peculiar to academic contexts and social and cultural issues*. However, there are strong traces of an overarching deficit discourse even as the text purports to challenge this: through, for example, the emphasis on students as being the problem – it is their needs that are referred to rather than the institutions' conventions or practices – and by signalling a

normative trajectory through reference to *apprenticeship*. We do not know the position of the authors of this text, but we suggest that the use of the phrase ‘academic literacy’ here is an example of a strategic use of the phrase and potentially as a small (but important step) towards transforming institutional discourse and practices.⁶

The fluidity of the use of the phrase academic literacy/ies in part therefore reflects its position at the juncture of theory/research and strategic application: teacher-researchers need to face both ways – towards academic theorising and research – and also towards institutions and practices as they are currently configured. At the same time academic literacies can be clearly staked out as a dynamic research field with identifiable epistemological and ideological interests as outlined in this paper.

6 Expanding objects of research and theoretical frameworks

As long as writing continues to be at the heart of assessment in higher education, it is likely to be a key focus in academic literacies research. However in many ways this focus reflects a research agenda which is reactive rather than proactive in nature: understandably, teacher-researchers have sought to respond to the official and public deficit discourse on student writing in order to offer an alternative framing. As academic literacies research has grown in confidence, there are significant attempts by researchers within the field to seize the language agenda and open up new avenues for research and pedagogy which seek to encompass the broader array of representational and communicative resources that are at play – actually and potentially – and at stake in higher (and other) educational contexts.

Within this general move away from students and their writing as the problem, it is possible to discern significant dynamic developments in terms of the objects of study and theoretical influences.

A range of semiotic practices

Whilst students’ written texts and their writing have been the focus of much academic literacies research, some work has focused on expectations and experiences of engaging in academic *reading* (Mann, 2000; Lu, 2004; van Pletzen, 2006). In addition, the multimodal nature of academic communication is increasingly under scrutiny, whether in relation to conventional teaching and learning communicative practices such as the lecture (Thesen, 2006; see also Thesen, this issue) or practices mediated by new technologies (Goodfellow et al., 2004). Researchers are bringing to bear a number of approaches, including critical pedagogy (Freire, 1996), multimodality (Kress, 2000; Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001), and psychosocial perspectives (Goodman, 1994).

Institutional and disciplinary practices

As a way of understanding what may be at stake for student participation and access to dominant academic practices and genres, there is a notable interest in shifting the lens away from students' writing towards the disciplinary and institutional practices in which writing – and other communication practices – are generated and sustained. Thus there is interest in exploring contemporary disciplinary practices and their associated rhetorical conventions (for example, see discussions of argument in Mitchell, 1994; Mitchell and Andrews, 2000), curriculum design (Lea, 2004) and oral and multimodal forms of academic communication (Thesen, 2006; Archer, 2006). There is also strong interest in excavating the historical roots of current conventions and practices (see Turner, 2004). Researchers draw on a range of theoretical and analytic traditions including socially oriented theories of learning (Wenger, 1998), critical historical discourse approaches (Bazerman, 1988) and multimodal theories of communication (Kress, 2000; Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001).

Professional academic writers

There is a growing interest in exploring the writing practices of academics as professional writers (Curry and Lillis, 2004; Lillis and Curry, 2006a, 2006b) which links with existing autobiographical or reflective approaches (Villanueva, 1993; Belcher and Connor, 2001; Casanave, 2002) and ethnographically informed studies on scholarly writing (Flowerdew, 2000; Monroe, 2002; Thaiss and Zawacki, 2006). In many ways, the high status academic journal article continues to serve as an implicit model for the texts which students are expected to produce. Thus exploring what may be at stake for professional writers producing such texts, helps to make visible the values and ideologies underlying dominant practices governing student writing. Furthermore, research focusing on gatekeeping practices illuminates the politics of academic knowledge production in global and local contexts including the politics of English as the global medium of academic texts. Researchers draw on critical approaches to World Englishes (Canagarajah, 2002b) and socioeconomic theories such as world systems theories (Wallerstein, 1991).

Diverse educational domains

The dominant domain in academic literacies research has been higher education. More recently there is a growing interest in using this frame explicitly to explore writing in other educational contexts, such as further education (see Ivanič and Stachwell, this issue) but also school based contexts (Oliver, 2005; see also Michael-Luna and Canagarajah, this issue). In some ways, the recent

focus on compulsory schooling represents a re-visiting of foundational work in New Literacy Studies (such as Heath, 1983) and Michaels (1981, see also discussion in Gee, 1996). The return to school based literacy practices represents an important move towards understanding the development of academic related meaning making practices across the life span.

Vocational and professional domains

There is a recognition that writing practices within academia are not hermetically sealed off from other practices in a number of ways. Most obviously in higher education, there are many professionally/vocationally oriented courses – law, medicine, social work – which involve students writing in hybrid genres and discourses, the complexity of which is often unrecognised by lecturers and departments (Stierer, 2000; Baynham, 2000; Creme, 2003; Rai, 2004, 2006). A key focus here has been on critically exploring the nature of so-called ‘reflective writing’, an increasingly common type of writing in university courses related to professional/vocational practice and experience. Researchers are looking to draw in theories of self from other academic fields, such as critical psychoanalysis, in order to enhance existing social understandings of identity and identification in writing (see Hunt, 2000; Hunt and Sampson, 2006).

Boundary crossing

Studies show that for many students in the current complex landscape of higher education, a simple trajectory starting from one point in a specific course or discipline through to an end point in the same discipline is not the norm: students move within and across disciplines either as part of their study or because of the fragmented or interrupted nature of their participation. An important focus here is the extent and ways in which writers are enabled (or not) to draw on their existing resources for meaning making (see Thesen and van Pletzen, 2006; Lillis, 1997, 2003; Scott and Turner, 2005; Ivanič, this issue). Researchers here draw on dialogic theories of language, notably Bakhtinian informed notions of intertextuality and dialogism (Bakhtin, 1981) and post colonial notions of ‘third space’ (Bhabha, 1994).

Multilingualism as resource for meaning making

Much of the research reported within this frame emanates from Anglophone centre contexts, so perhaps not surprisingly, emphasis has been on monolingual writing practices and writing in the medium of English. However this has been critiqued more recently (Thesen and van Pletzen, 2006) and multilingual practices are increasingly on the agenda both at school level (see Michael-Luna

and Canagarajah, this issue) and in professional academic writing (see Lillis and Curry, 2006a, 2006b), raising questions about the ways in which linguistic resources are managed in multilingual contexts (Lillis and Curry, 2006b). Work in this area is informed by work on multiliteracies, notably the New London Group (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000) and critical approaches towards contrastive rhetoric (see for example, Mauranen, 1993; Kubota and Lehner, 2004) and towards linguistic ‘competence’ (see Leung, 2005).

Computer mediated practices

Work by Goodfellow et al. (2004) and McKenna (2005) bring a social practice account to bear on academic communication mediated by new technologies, challenging both reifications of technologies and the treatment of computer mediated communication as straightforwardly akin to spoken language. A key focus in the exploration of computer mediated practices is the extent and ways in which new literacy practices are developing as well as the emergence of new conventions for organising meaning-making (see Schroeder, 2001; Attar, 2005; Goodfellow, 2005; McKenna and McAvinia, 2007; see also Lea, this issue).

Meta-theory

Throughout we have emphasised the centrality of ethnographic framings to work in academic literacies which values attention to the fine and sometimes apparently inconsequential detail of the practices in which text production is embedded. Attention to micro details (Scott, 2005) is also accompanied by the use and development of theory – as evident in the range of theoretical frames referred to above – but also to meta-theory as illustrated by Street’s more recent development of ‘new communicative order’ to describe the complex web of literacy practices linked to globalisation (Street, 2004; see also ‘Reflections on academic literacies’ in this issue).

7 New directions and areas for research

At the beginning of this paper we stressed that our ‘map’ would necessarily be selective in its focal points. In drawing the ‘map’ we have located ‘academic literacies’ at the juncture of research/theory and strategic application. As such academic literacies work is inescapably involved in the ongoing tensions around official policy that focuses on students only as contributors to the national economy (see Coffield, 2006, for recent critique) or offers simple problem-solution responses to increasingly richly diverse education domains. Academic literacies constitutes an oppositional order of discourse (Foucault, 2002) and has made significant achievements at a number of levels: theoretical, empirical

and applicational. In relation to the first two levels, teacher-researchers have managed to bring to bear an anthropologically oriented practice account of literacy to the study of academic communication. This approach has enabled individual researchers to engage with the complex issues surrounding, most notably, student academic writing, in contrast to the often impoverished perspective on language and literacy that is trumpeted in official and public discourses. In this way 'academic literacies' research meets Hymes' goal of a 'socially constituted' applied linguistics, one aim of which is to produce people who are 'adept at devising and conducting systematic empirical analyses' of real world language problems (as discussed in Rampton, 2003: 283). The openness to what the 'problem' may be has led researchers to follow a strong tradition in applied linguistics, that of recognising the validity of using a range of data (see Brumfit, 2003).

In adopting an ethnographic stance, academic literacies research incorporates a wide range of data in order to explore how resources are used for meaning making and communication in academic (related) contexts. In relation to the third level – that of strategic application – there is evidence that academic literacies is informing institutional pedagogical initiatives (see for example Theses and van Pletzen, 2006) and more mainstream education debates (see for examples, Haggis, 2003; Ganobcsik-Williams, 2006), thus offering an additional and contrastive perspective to the dominant influence of psychologically oriented approaches.

However, within the strengths of academic literacies research are also to be found some of its weaknesses. The widespread use of small scale ethnographically framed research is not surprising given the usefulness of such an approach to the lone researcher wanting to engage critically with the contexts in which she is working, especially given the marginal institutional position that many academic literacies researchers occupy. The value of ethnography is well established in theoretical terms, but just as importantly for transformational knowledge making, the value of ethnography as ideology/theory lies in its emphasis on addressing inequalities (see Blommaert, 2005), a key concern to academic literacies researchers. However, currently, academic literacies as a research field tends to be dominated by small scale research which can be serendipitous rather than selective in design and which may result in inhibiting empirical and theoretical developments of the field.

A further limitation in some work is the lack of attention to texts as linguistic and cultural artefacts: as stated throughout this paper, the principal achievement of academic literacies research has been to dislodge the text as linguistic object as the primary focus and to direct attention towards the practices in which texts are embedded. However, in doing so, texts, and more importantly, detailed analysis of texts can disappear altogether.

A key challenge therefore is to acknowledge achievements and challenges and work towards developing the field in the following ways. At this point, we consider that our aims should be to:

- Seek to harness research resources which would enable selectively designed/larger scale and/or longitudinal studies to be carried out.
- Develop ethnographically sensitive text analytic tools which enable researchers to bring the text back into the frame by tracking production practices in a dynamic way. Academic literacies in this respect can both draw on and look to key developments in some approaches in applied linguistics and ethnography more broadly, such as linguistic ethnography (and ethnographically oriented approaches to critical discourse analysis – see special issue in the *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, ‘Linguistic ethnography: links, problems and possibilities’ (11(5), November 2007) as well as drawing on critically oriented approaches to texts discussed above (such as Harwood and Hadley, 2004).
- Incorporate into the critical ethnographic gaze the procedures and practices – the often taken-for-granted ‘tools of the trade’ – of academic literacies research that create the objects of study (as in Goodwin, 1994 and Blommaert, 2004).
- Use analytical notions that are both delicate enough to capture ethnographic detail and powerful enough to connect with major world trends, notably globalisation. A key example here is the notion of mobility in relation to resources and users as developed by Blommaert (2005).

And, finally, of crucial importance in a field which is constituted by teacher-researchers, to:

- Sustain current support and critical discussion systems that exist for the development of researchers in academic literacies, acknowledging the marginal position of many in this field. This is played out in different ways across different local and national contexts: through participation in professional groups in some national contexts (as reflected in some strands of Conference College Composition and Communication in the US); in institutionally organised pedagogical projects (such as that illustrated in Thesen and van Pletzen, 2006); through smaller scale and informal organisations and events organised by teacher-researchers (such as the UK based ‘Writing development in higher education’ conference and the ‘Inter-university academic literacies research group’ which holds regular meetings, involves international participation via email and has in this way supported a wide range of teacher-researcher initiatives).⁷

About the authors

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Notes

- 1 See, for examples: http://www.une.edu.au/tlc/alo_index.htm; <http://www.up.ac.za/beta/academic/humanities/eng/eng/unitlangskills/eng/ung.htm>; http://www.education.murdoch.edu.au/academic_literacy/index.html. Accessed 8 June 2007.
- 2 The examples provided here are intended to illustrate different emphases but the use and claim to 'academic literacy/ies' is even more fluid in practice. A further key difference in use for example is between the UK and US in that in the US 'academic literacy' is often used to refer to academic reading and writing activities and conventions at school level. See for examples <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/projects/project.asp?id=87> Accessed 20 May 2007.
- 3 A recent example in the UK is a report by the Royal Literary Fund on student writing in universities. The editor pointed to their limited familiarity with the phenomenon being discussed, and even stated in the introduction that the report was emphatically 'not intended to be a specialist literature review; neither is it an academic survey of current research' (page vii). Nevertheless, the report was given wide coverage on national radio and newspapers, the tone of which is illustrated in the national newspaper headline, 'University students: they can't write, spell or present an argument', *The Independent* 24 May 2006.
- 4 We are stressing here the explicit transformational interest that is at the core of academic literacies work. But we recognise that transformational potential is evident in some work which is centrally presented – and we would argue – taken up as normative, notably the work of John Swales.

- 5 One tension in mapping out 'academic literacies' as a field of inquiry from a predominantly UK perspective is that unlike the US, it has no one (albeit contested) disciplinary/institutional space.
- 6 Similar referential and indexical uses can be found at a site aimed at students in the field of childhood, funded by a UK national body aimed at improving teaching and learning (<http://medal.unn.ac.uk>). Accessed May 2007.
- 7 This is chaired by Mary Scott at the Institute of Education, London and has been running for a period of 15 years. It is an open forum providing an intellectual home to many teacher-researchers in academic literacies in the UK, and via email discussion, to scholars internationally.

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