

CHAPTER 14

“DOING SOMETHING THAT’S REALLY IMPORTANT”: MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT AS A RESOURCE FOR TEACHERS’ TRANSFORMATIVE WORK WITH STUDENT WRITERS IN THE DISCIPLINES

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A number of studies drawing on academic literacies have focused on the perspectives of academics as writers (e.g., Lesley Gourlay, 2011; Mary Lea & Barry Stierer, 2009; Theresa Lillis & Mary Jane Curry, 2010). However, academics’ pedagogic practices around student writing have generally been investigated with an emphasis on learners’ point of view (e.g., Roz Ivanič, 1998; Roz Ivanič, Romy Clark & Rachel Rimmershaw, 2000; Theresa Lillis, 2001), though with some exceptions (Richard Bailey & Mark Garner, 2010; Brenda Gay et al., 1999; Mary Lea & Brian Street, 1999). This has resulted in a powerful critique of prevailing practice, without blaming individual teachers (Lea & Stierer, 2000). Much work in the field over the past decade has also addressed the need for a “design frame” (Gunther Kress, 1998, 2000, cited in Lillis, 2003) “which can actively contribute to student writing pedagogy as both theory and practice” (p. 192). Thus pedagogies around writing are present in academic literacies research as a frequent source of difficulty for students but also as having “transformative” potential (Theresa Lillis & Mary Scott, 2007). Here, I broadly adopt Theresa Lillis and Mary Scott’s framing of “transformative” approaches to student writing as contrasting with a more “normative” stance resting on a number of educational myths (Kress, 2007) including “the unidirectionality of the teacher-student relation” (Lillis & Scott, 2007, p. 13). One of the key constitutive elements of this transformative approach is an interest in eliciting the (often undervalued) perspectives of student writers and in valuing the resources they bring to meaning-making in the academy.

However, numerous empirical studies have shown that academic writers’ textual practices are frequently embodied in complex chains of events, in which a

number of different actors play a range of roles in shaping the text, as co-writers, feedback-givers, proof-readers, etc. (e.g., Nigel Harwood et al., 2009; Lillis & Curry, 2010). It is therefore impossible to draw neat boundaries between student writers' practices and those of other social actors such as their academic teachers. I argue therefore that "transformative" pedagogic design around student writing can only flourish where "the lived experience of teaching and learning from **both** student and tutor perspectives" (Roz Ivanič & Mary Lea, 2006 p. 7; my emphasis) is taken into account. This helps to ensure that one form of "unidirectionality" is not replaced by another, and acknowledges that pedagogical relations are open to contestation and change. It also recognizes that a "transformative interest in meaning-making" (Lillis & Scott, 2007, p. 13) legitimately encompasses the meanings teachers bring to and derive from their practices around student writing (see also Roozen et al., Chapter 15 this volume).

The study I draw on in this paper therefore used ethnographically-oriented methodologies (Judith Green & David Bloome, 1997; Lillis, 2008) to focus on the less extensively researched experiences and perspectives of disciplinary academic teachers, framing pedagogies around writing as a dimension of academic literacies to be empirically explored, without "making prior assumptions as to which [practices] are either appropriate or effective" (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 158). Thus my approach was to highlight participants' understandings of what was satisfactory, generative and meaningful, or otherwise, in their practice around student writing as an indication of what might be "transformative" in their contexts.

THE EMPIRICAL STUDY

The project involved fourteen academic teacher participants, in six diverse UK universities and a range of disciplines. Initial, semi-structured interviews were followed up with text-focused interviews, based for example around marked assignments, or moderation paperwork, generating "talk around text" (Lillis, 2008, 2009). Other data were collected, such as guidance and assessment materials, audio-recordings of observed face-to-face sessions, or made by participants while marking assignments. The analytical approach was to weave a detailed picture by moving back and forth between different sources of data, using individual case studies as "vertical" warp threads running through the analysis, connected by the weft of "horizontal" thematic analysis across the study (David Barton & Mary Hamilton, 1998). I was interested in participants' experience of their disciplinary writing work with students, in their perceptions of its success and what it meant to them. I therefore paid attention to ways in which participants' practices and wordings might invoke broader "discourses of writing and of learning to write" (Ivanič, 2004) in the academy. This approach showed clearly that individual teachers actively configured contexts for writing work with students, and positioned themselves within—rather

than simply responding to—their institutional contexts through practice around student writing. Here I present two (pseudonymous) miniature case studies which convey something of the complexity of disciplinary writing work with students, and of how it is experienced, valued and understood by academic teachers.

MINIATURE CASE STUDY 1: MIKE, GEOGRAPHY

Mike works in a small, relatively new “teaching-led”¹ university. He describes himself as an “enthusiastic teacher of Geography” and in a departmental website video declares a commitment to professional teaching in the subject. A contrast emerges between Mike’s practice on an “innovative” third year module and his routines elsewhere, for example on a second-year urban landscapes module. The latter is assessed through an assignment which Mike describes as a:

conventional essay ... where students do have to jump through the hoops otherwise there’s no foundation.

He collects the anonymized scripts from a locked box after the deadline “and then they lurk” in piles in his office until he has time to tackle them. Mike’s marking involves a range of specific practices, including scanning for relevant academic references and key words, and ticking when he finds them:

ok they’ve got the basic points about geometry, cleanliness ...
they get a tick for that.

He writes marginal comments and finishes with a feedback summary. However, he believes that these “carefully crafted” messages often go unheeded by students:

they see 62 and then they put it back on the pile and then they go home.

In his third year feminist geography module, Mike has introduced a new assessed “guided learning log” which cannot be anonymized. He gives a detailed description in the module handbook, holds an assignment-specific workshop, provides guidance and feedback for each diary entry, as well as a final summative assessment. Mike describes how taking on this module proved to be a key moment in his development as an academic teacher:

It’s almost like an epiphany—that if you understood the material that I was teaching properly you wouldn’t assess it in traditional ways.

He explains that the new learning log is a hybrid genre of academic writing in which students must be “personal” and at the same time “scholarly”; through writing they are coming to grips with “ways of knowing” in this branch of the

discipline, engaging in “feminist critiques of science.” Mike’s practice around this assignment involves collaboration with a writing support specialist in his institution to set up tailored group support sessions. Their work together begins with a chance conversation in a pub, which Mike believes partly accounts for the success of the collaboration:

Because J and I knew each other and I’d had a good relaxed conversation with her perhaps ... she knew exactly what I was trying to achieve with this work.

MINIATURE CASE STUDY 2: EMMA, COMPUTER SCIENCE

Emma works in a prestigious Russell Group university. She is personally interested in teaching, but believes that the work around student writing she talks about is “worth zero” in institutions like hers where “research ... is what counts.” Like Mike, Emma adopts contrasting approaches to student writing in different modules. In one second year module, students produce some computer code and write a descriptive report: guidelines and brief assessment criteria are provided on the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). Emma marks half the one hundred scripts, describing marking fifty assignments on the same topic as “horrendous”; she also expresses doubt about its effectiveness:

I’m not sure that the student, by getting it wrong and then by getting short remarks on it which tell him that’s not good, actually can really improve to be honest.

Students also dislike the module and the assessment; however, Emma doubts whether anything will change in future, because although she has offered her “take” on the assignment to the unit leader, she explains that feeling comfortable enough to pursue such matters depends on relationships with colleagues, and that “essentially [she has] none with this guy.”

Emma is unit leader responsible for a third/fourth year specialist module. Soon after arriving in post, she changed the assessment, introducing a very different working process. Instead of an individual essay on a set theme, students choose their own topic in small groups, do some initial research and write an “extended abstract.” Groups then meet with both course lecturers to receive feedback, ask questions and set out plans for completing the project in the form of a “proper scientific paper.” At every stage, students are supported by face-to-face contact:

We really try to get them to understand that they are not alone in this ... we really encourage them to come, and we are not making fun of them or ... seeing this as ... just a trivial thing, just a student’s problem.

Emma contrasts the experience of reading completed scripts with the second year assignment:

This is **way** more interesting to read ... there were fifteen groups and all of them have had different topics ... [Emma’s emphasis]

This enthusiasm is echoed in observed group meetings in which Emma and her colleague make plain their enjoyment of student writing which does not cover too-familiar territory. For example, to one group Emma says she is really pleased with their topic, because it will mean “good added value for me and the other students.” To another, she remarks positively on the “added value for you writing and for me reading.” The idea of “value added” seems to be closely aligned during these sessions with the level of personal interest and potential for learning which each assignment topic presents for tutors. In one session, Emma remarks that students have chosen a nice topic and “you’re lucky that I don’t know so much about [x], lucky you.” This appears to reverse the usual tutor/student hierarchies around writing: Emma is openly hoping that students will choose topics which are new to her, positioning herself as someone who is still learning and curious about her subject, and students as having something to offer. This message is echoed in VLE guidance which explains to students that the assignment provides an opportunity to “try out being the lecturer for a small part of the course.”

Another good reason in Emma’s view for introducing this new assignment is that master’s students who also take the module, often from overseas, benefit greatly from the chance to practice this sort of research-oriented writing in English in a UK setting. Although time consuming for tutors, the benefits come later, when they are supporting their dissertation work. Emma thinks it would be even better

If we could get the language people ... drag them somehow into our courses where there is writing done ... but there is no interaction in this way, it just doesn’t happen.

Another key benefit she sees in this way of working is that it emphasizes a process which will be very valuable for students as engineers in the future.

STEPPING OUT OF ROUTINE PRACTICES

These brief accounts illustrate some themes recurring across the study. Both Mike and Emma are engaged in routine practices around student writing, which have negative associations for them as tedious and dreaded tasks with questionable impact on students (Jackie Tuck, 2012). However, along with other study participants, both experienced much more satisfying moments in which it seemed possible to make a worthwhile difference to students’ writing practices. These were

often characterized by an opportunity to interact face-to-face with students during the writing process, either where disciplinary contact time was allocated for the purpose, or where there was a conscious decision to make time available informally, for example when Emma and her colleague “really try to get [students] to understand they’re not alone.” These opportunities enabled academic teachers to work iteratively and formatively with students’ texts, rather than in a one-off engagement at the point of summative assessment.

Emma’s case illustrates another characteristic of the more satisfying and productive moments in participants’ disciplinary writing work: the opportunity to disrupt, even if only briefly, the hierarchies usually associated with student writing for assessment. For example, Emma’s group assignment encourages students “to try out being the lecturer,” she emphasizes to them their future role as engineers, and that staff will not “make fun” or trivialize their concerns. These moments also often involved opportunities to collaborate closely with disciplinary colleagues or with language specialists, often building on existing informal alliances—for example, Mike’s chance conversation in a pub with a writing support specialist. Where these informal opportunities were absent, as in Emma’s case where she has no “relationship” with the second year unit leader, or “interaction” with the “language people,” participants seemed less likely to step out of routine practices, however unsatisfactory. A thread running through these examples is that pedagogic practices which participants felt were making a positive difference to student writing also entailed transformations in relationships with students and colleagues, emphasising dialogue and mutual exchange. These opportunities did not simply arise, but had to be actively carved out through creative trade-offs between what was desirable and what was possible at different times.

INVESTING IN DISCIPLINARY WRITING WORK

These findings raise a further question: what made the investment involved in finding space, time and energy for productive disciplinary writing work “worthwhile”? Again, both Mike’s and Emma’s cases reflect broader patterns in the study as a whole. Emma offers an interesting critical reflection:

Writing is called a transferable skill but I’m not sure that it actually is so much, because quite often you only learn when you’re doing something that’s really important.

Just as students’ academic writing may only really develop when they are doing “something really important” to them, teacher-participants needed good reasons to step out of the usual routines around student writing. There were pragmatic and strategic benefits which encouraged them to invest time and effort in productive disciplinary writing work, for example, where personal reputation within or

beyond the organization was perceived to be at stake, or where time spent now saved time later. However, equally important was the opportunity for meaningful engagement, for example, where Emma and her colleague on the specialist module can learn something new about their subject.

These cases also point to factors which seemed to discourage academic teachers in the study from moving beyond unproductive routine practices. Again, questions of meaningful engagement were as important as pragmatic considerations such as time or reputation. In some participants’ institutions, anonymized assessment regimes precluded the type of mutually satisfying formative engagement with students’ texts illustrated in the cases discussed here, except in situations where an exception could be made, as in Mike’s learning log.

DISCOURSES OF LEARNING AND WRITING

The study also brought to light the ways in which academic teachers’ practices were bound up with discourses of learning and of writing. For example, the investment Mike makes in an alternative approach to writing on his third year module is a profoundly epistemological one: sudden insight leads him to make a connection between students’ disciplinary thinking and what they *do* in writing. What is striking here is that this epistemological approach seems to contrast with Mike’s experience on other modules where students just “tell you what they think you need to know” and “jump through the hoops.” Similarly, while Emma sees her work with students on the third year module as helping them understand “what scientific means in terms of writing,” she has no equivalent sense of disciplinary purpose in her work with the second year students’ reports, commenting that “you wonder why you’re doing it.” These examples suggest that an approach which downplays disciplinary meaning-making for student writers is frequently experienced by academic teachers as rather meaningless and pointless in pedagogic terms.

This separation in discourse and practice between disciplinary learning on one hand, and learning to write on the other, where the latter is cast as the content-free acquisition of skills and mastery of conventions, surfaced repeatedly across the study in different types of data, including texts (echoing Lea & Street, 1999). However, as these miniature case studies show, at particular moments and in specific contexts, a perceived link between writing and learning for students was mirrored in a more epistemological approach to writing pedagogy. Albeit briefly in some cases, disciplinary learning/teaching and the learning/teaching of writing were one and the same.

IMPLICATIONS

The study described here brought to light a number of ways in which academic teachers were finding productive—and potentially transformative—ways to work

with their students on writing in the disciplines, where there was sufficient perceived incentive for the teacher in doing so. One clear implication for practice is that it is important to find ways of developing disciplinary writing work by nurturing academic teachers' sense of personal investment in initiatives which help them move away from less productive routine practices (see Bailey & Garner, 2010). "Value-added" can take a number of pragmatic forms (e.g., enhanced reputation, time saved later) but also key was meaningful engagement: the rewards of mutual learning and the pleasures of collaboration. These case studies show that what might be transformative for students in terms of academic writing is inseparable from teachers' own transformation, for example Mike's "epiphany" when he realizes he can devise an assessment which connects epistemologically with the subject, or Emma's more incremental realization in the light of experience that writing may not be an easily transferable skill.

Academic literacies research has brought to light the importance of a "transformative interest" in student-writer meanings and perspectives as the foundation for transformative pedagogies, acknowledging a commitment to helping students to be successful writers in their own terms. The findings of this study refine this picture, suggesting that what counts as making a positive difference has to be negotiated: both students and teachers need to see the point, and to feel that the investment of time, reputation and other resources is "worthwhile." It is arguably therefore just as important to nurture the conditions for teacher transformation as it is to provide incentives for students to engage at more than a superficial level with academic writing. Although participants in this study were not explicitly drawing on an academic literacies framework in their disciplinary work with student writers, these findings suggest that an academic literacies approach has the potential to support the development of such conditions.

One way to work towards this may be to remind academic teachers of what many already instinctively know when they engage in their own writing for the discipline: that thinking, learning and knowledge-making are inseparable from representation, and that writing is therefore profoundly relevant to learning and so to teaching in the disciplines. Institutions must support both timetabled and informal provision if this integration is to be realized. Other challenges must be addressed at institutional level. It is difficult not to reduce large-cohort written assessments to "hoop-jumping exercises" with little meaning for staff or students. This is particularly so where students are writing in traditional academic genres such as the essay which lend themselves to standardized assessment predicated on the assumption of a single (anonymous) author. Perhaps one way to approach this problem would be to accept the need in the current context for assessments in which students demonstrate that they have the "foundation" (Mike), but to dissociate this sort of assessed outcome more often from the process of academic text production. For example, more use could be made of multiple choice or short answer assessment in order to

free up time for more dialogic and collaborative pedagogies which are the *sine qua non* of transformative practice around student writing.

NOTE

1. Study participants often used the terminology of the UK sector in defining their institutions as either “research-led” such as those in the Russell Group, or “teaching-led,” for example Mike’s institution, a small university specializing mainly in Arts subjects, established within the past fifteen years. The Russell Group is a large, long-established, elite grouping of “top” UK research-intensive universities.

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