STUDENT WRITING IN HIGHER EDUCATION: AN ACADEMIC LITERACIES APPROACH

MARY R. LEA Institute of Educational Technology, Open University, UK and

BRIAN V. STREET King's College, London, UK

ABSTRACT This article addresses the issue of student writing in higher education. It draws on the findings of an Economic and Social Research Council funded project which examined the contrasting expectations and interpretations of academic staff and students regarding undergraduate students' written assignments. It is suggested that the implicit models that have generally been used to understand student writing do not adequately take account of the importance of issues of identity and the institutional relationships of power and authority that surround, and are embedded within, diverse student writing practices across the university. A contrasting and therefore complementary perspective is used to present debates about 'good' and `poor' student writing. The article outlines an 'academic literacies' framework which can take account of the conflicting and contested nature of writing practices, and may therefore be more valuable for understanding student writing in today's higher education than traditional models and approaches.

Introduction

The opinion is often expressed that standards of student 'literacy' are falling, whether at school or in higher education: many academic staff claim that students can no longer write. 'Back to basics' ideas are now fast taking hold in today's higher education. Recently, we received an award from the Economic and Social Research Council to conduct a research project entitled 'Perspectives on Academic Literacies: an institutional approach' that attempted to look at these issues in more depth. The research looked at perceptions and practices of student writing in higher education, taking as case studies one new and an old university in southern England. Set against the background of numerous changes in higher education in the UK and increasing numbers of non-traditional entrants, this research has been concerned with a wider institutional approach to student writing, rather than merely locating 'problems' with individual students. One of the main purposes of the research has been to move away from a skills-based, deficit model of student writing and to consider the complexity of writing practices that are taking place at degree level in universities. As a starting point, the research adopts the concept of academic litefacies as a framework for understanding university writing practices.

Academic Literacies

Learning in higher education involves adapting to new ways of knowing: new ways of understanding, interpreting and organising knowledge. Academic literacy practices-- reading and writing within disciplines--constitute central processes through which students learn new subjects and develop their knowledge about new areas of study. A practices approach to literacy takes account of the cultural and contextual component of writing and reading practices, and this in turn has important implications for an understanding of student learning. Educational research into student learning in higher education has tended to concentrate on ways in which students can be helped to adapt their practices to those of the university (Gibbs, 1994)' from this perspective, the codes and conventions of academia can be taken as given. In contrast, our research is founded on the premise that in order to understand the nature of academic learning, it is important to investigate the understandings of both academic staff and students about their own literacy practices, without making prior assumptions as to which practices are either appropriate or effective. This is particularly important in trying to develop a more complex analysis of what it means to become academically literate. We believe that it is important to realise that meanings are contested amongst the different parties involved: institutions, staff and

students. Viewing literacy from a cultural and social practice approach (rather than in terms of educational judgements about good and bad writing) and approaching meanings as contested can give us insights into the nature of academic literacy in particular and academic learning in general: through researching these differing expectations and interpretations of university writing we hope to throw light on failure or non-completion, as well as success and progression.

The notion of academic literacies has been developed from the area of 'new literacy studies' (Street, 1984; Barton, 1994; Baynham, 1995) and is an attempt to draw out the implications of this approach for our understanding of issues of student learning. We have argued elsewhere (Lea & Street, 1997a) that educational research into student writing in higher education has fallen into three main perspectives or models: 'study skills'; 'academic socialisation'; and 'academic literacies' (see appendix). The models are not mutually exclusive, and we would not want to view them in a simple linear time dimension, whereby one model supersedes or replaces the insights provided by the other. Rather, we would like to think that each model successively encapsulates the other, so that the academic socialisation perspective takes account of study skills but includes them in the broader context of the acculturation processes we describe later, and likewise the academic literacies approach encapsulates the academic socialisation model, building on the insights developed there as well as the study skills view. The academic literacies model, then, incorporates both of the other models into a more encompassing understanding of the nature of student writing within institutional practices, power relations and identities, as we explain later. We take a hierarchical view of the relationship between the three models, privileging the 'academic literacies' approach. We believe that, in teaching as well as in research, addressing specific skills issues around student writing (such as how to open or close an essay or whether to use the first person) takes on entirely different meanings if the context is solely that of study skills, if the process is seen as part of academic socialisation, or if it is viewed more broadly as an aspect of the whole institutional and epistemological context. We explicate each model in turn as both a summary of our major findings in the research project and as a set of lenses through which to view the account we give of the research.

The study skills approach has assumed that literacy is a set of atomised skills which students have to learn and which are then transferable to other contexts. The focus is on attempts to 'fix' problems with student learning, which are treated as a kind of pathology. The theory of language on which it is based emphasises surface features, grammar and spelling. Its sources lie in behavioural psychology and training programmes and it conceptualises student writing as technical and instrumental. In recent years the crudity and insensitivity of this approach have led to refinement of the meaning of the 'skills' involved and attention to broader issues of learning and social context, and have led us to what we (Lea & Street, 1997a) have termed the 'academic socialisation' approach.

From the academic socialisation perspective, the task of the tutor/adviser is to induct students into a new 'culture', that of the academy. The focus is on student orientation to learning and interpretation of learning tasks, through conceptualisation, for instance, of a distinction between 'deep', 'surface' and 'strategic' approaches to learning (Marton et aL, 1997). The sources of this perspective lie in social psychology, in anthropology and in constructivist education. Although more sensitive both to the student as learner and to the cultural context, the approach could nevertheless be criticised on a number of grounds. It appears to assume that the academy is a relatively homogeneous culture, whose norms and practices have simply to be learnt to provide access to the whole institution. Even though at some level disciplinary and departmental difference may be acknowledged, institutional practices, including processes of change and the exercise of power, do not seem to be sufficiently theorised. Similarly, despite the fact that contextual factors in student writing are recognised as important (Hounsell, 1988; Taylor et aL, 1988), this approach tends to treat writing as a transparent medium of representation and so fails to address the deep language, literacy and discourse issues involved in the institutional production and representation of meaning.

The third approach, the one most closely allied to the New Literacy Studies, we refer to as academic literacies. This approach sees literacies as social practices, in the way we have suggested. It views student writing and learning as issues at the level of epistemology and

identities rather than skill or socialisation. An academic literacies approach views the institutions in which academic practices take place as constituted in, and as sites of, discourse and power. It sees the literacy demands of the curriculum as involving a variety of communicative practices, including genres, fields and disciplines. From the student point of view a dominant feature of academic literacy practices is the requirement to switch practices between one setting and another, to deploy a repertoire of linguistic practices appropriate to each setting, and to handle the social meanings and identities that each evokes. This emphasis on identities and social meanings draws attention to deep affective and ideological conflicts in such switching and use of the linguistic repertoire. A student's personal identity-who am 'I'--may be challenged by the forms of writing required in different disciplines, notably prescriptions about the use of impersonal and passive forms as opposed to first person and active forms, and students may feel threatened and resistant--'this isn't me' (Lea, 1994; Ivanic, 1998). The recognition of this level of engagement with student writing, as opposed to the more straightforward study skills and academic socialisation approaches, comes from the social and ideological orientation of the 'New Literacy Studies'. Allied to this is work in critical discourse analysis, systemic functional linguistics and cultural anthropology, which has come to see student writing as being concerned with the processes of meaning-making and contestation around meaning rather than as skills or deficits. There is a growing body of literature based upon this approach, which suggests that one explanation for problems in student writing might be the gaps between academic staff expectations and student interpretations of what is involved in student writing (Cohen, 1993; Lea, 1994; Street, 1995; Lea & Street, 1997b; Stierer, 1997).

The Research

During 1995-96 we carried out research at two universities, one new and one traditional, in the south-east of England. Ten interviews were conducted with staff in the older university and 21 students were interviewed, either individually or in small groups. At the new university, 13 members of academic staff and 26 students were interviewed in the same way. The interviews at both institutions included the Directors of Quality Assurance Units and 'learning support' staff.

One of our initial research objectives was to explore the contribution of ethnographicbased research to educational development in higher education. The short length of the project limited the in-depth ethnographic approach which such research could warrant. However, we did adopt an 'ethnographic style' approach (Green & Bloome, 1997) to the research which included conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews with staff and students, participant observation of group sessions and attention to samples of students' writing, written feedback on students' work and handouts on 'essay' writing. A major part of the research has included a linguistically-based analysis of this textual material. As the research progressed we realised that this was an equally important source of data which we needed to consider in relation to the interview data. As researchers we were able to benefit from our own situated knowledge of the institutional settings within which we were researching. Adopting an ethnographic style approach to the research, within settings of which we already had prior knowledge, enabled us to move away from the focus on transcribed interview material to a more eclectic approach, merging the importance of understanding both texts and practices in the light of staff and student interpretations of university writing.

Our research, then, was not based on a representative sample from which generalisations could be drawn but rather was conceived as providing case studies that enabled us to explore theoretical issues and generate questions for further systematic study. Our approach, therefore, was in the ethnographic tradition described by Mitchell (1984). Rather than applying 'enumerative induction' (as in much scientific and statistical research) as a means to generalising, and for establishing the 'representativeness' of social data, Mitchell advocates what he terms 'analytical induction':

What the anthropologist using a case study to support an argument does is to show how general principles deriving from some theoretical orientation manifest themselves in some given set of particular circumstances. A good case study, therefore, enables the analyst to

establish theoretically valid connections between events and phenomena which previously were ineluctable. (Mitchell, 1984, p. 239)

In the present context, the tutors and students whom we interviewed and the documents we collected can be taken as case studies of different perspectives on academic literacies. Whilst not representing a sample from which generalisations can be drawn regarding the whole of English higher education, these case studies can point to important theoretical questions and connections that might not otherwise be raised. The data, for instance, enable us to explore the hypothesis that, viewed as 'academic literacies', the beliefs and practices of tutors and students constitute a different kind of evidence than if this same data were viewed in terms of skills or academic socialisation. These accounts can, for instance, provide evidence for differences between staff and students' understanding of the writing process at levels of epistemology, authority and contestation over knowledge rather than at the level of technical skill, surface linguistic competence or cultural assimilation. We have therefore approached our research data in order to acquire insights and conceptual elaboration on our three models of student writing and to generate from it analytic induction rather than 'enumerative induction'.

The unstructured, in-depth interviews examined how students understand the different literacy practices which they experience in their studies and in what ways academic staff understand the literacy requirements of their own subject area and make these explicit to their students. We gave participants the opportunity to reflect upon the writing practices of the university, at different levels and in different courses, subject areas and disciplines, and to consider not only the influences that were being brought to bear upon them from within the university but also those from other writing contexts. We asked staff to outline, as they saw them, the writing requirements of their own disciplines and subject areas and to describe the kinds and quantities of writing that were involved for their students. We also asked them to talk about their perceptions of problems with student writing and the ways in which these were addressed at both an individual and departmental level. Students explained the problems that they experienced with writing at the university and their perceptions of the writing requirements of different courses and subject areas. We also collected copious amounts of documentation from both staff and students: handouts on essay writing; examples of students' written work; course handbooks; assignment guidelines.

A further objective of our research was to contribute towards an institutional understanding of academic literacy practices in higher education and we therefore began the project with a focus upon three traditional academic categories: humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. In both universities we began by carrying out interviews with academic staff within each category and then went on to interview students. Early in the research it became clear from the interview data we were collecting that the traditional boundaries that we had identified to frame the research were in many senses irrelevant, particularly for students. Our interviews with students alerted us to the fact that old disciplinary divides were often not appropriate as research categories.

The diverse nature of the degree programmes at preliminary level resulted in students undertaking what we term 'course switching' which, we suggest, can be paralleled with linguistic code switching (Gumperz, 1982). In the case of 'course switching' students are having to interpret the writing requirements of different levels of academic activity. Such switching may range from academic disciplines in a traditional sense (such as physics and anthropology) to what we see as 'fields of study', such as modular programmes that incorporate elements of different disciplines and of interdisciplinary courses (such as Asian studies and business studies) and to specific modules or course units within programmes (such as twentieth-century women's literature and operations management). This switching may also encompass the different demands of individual subject tutors and their personal interpretations of writing requirements. As students switch between such disciplines, course units, modules and tutors, different assumptions about the nature of writing, related to different epistemological presuppositions about the nature of academic knowledge and learning, are being brought to bear, often implicitly, on the specific writing requirements of their assignments. Evidence from interviews with tutors and students and from handouts prepared for students on aspects of 'good' writing suggests that it is frequently very difficult for students to 'read off' from any such context what might be the

specific academic writing requirements of that context. Nor, as we shall see below, did the provision of general statements about the nature of academic writing help students with the specificity of demands in each context.

We also interviewed learning support staff in both institutions. The data collected from these interviews reinforced the views expressed by students that many of the difficulties they experienced with writing arose from the conflicting and contrasting requirements for writing on different courses and from the fact that these requirements were frequently left implicit. Learning support staff also questioned whether academic staff were aware that they were asking for specific ways of writing knowledge from their students.

Requirements of Student Writing: staff interpretations

The interviews with staff suggest that academic staff have their own fairly well-defined views regarding what constitutes the elements of a good piece of student writing in the areas in which they teach. These tend to refer to form in a more generic sense, including attention to syntax, punctuation and layout, and to such apparently evident components of rational essay writing as 'structure', 'argument' and 'clarity'. Their own disciplinary history had a clear influence on staff conceptualisations and representations of what were the most important elements to look for in students' writing at both levels, although the epistemological and methodological issues that underlay them were often expressed through the surface features and components of 'writing' in itself--as we detail below. It was this confusion, we argue, that led to difficulties for students not yet acquainted with the disciplinary underpinnings of faculty feedback. This confusion was compounded by the move towards multidisciplinary courses at degree level and the modular system that was fully in place at one of the universities. As a result, although faculty understanding of student writing was often described in disciplinary terms (for example, 'In history the use of evidence is particularly important', or 'In English we are looking for clarity of expression'), in practice staff were often teaching within programmes which integrated a number of disciplinary approaches and for which the writing requirements consequently varied.

Additionally, some academic staff were teaching in courses where even the traditional disciplines were looking at new ways of communicating that discipline outside of the academic community, developing what we term 'empathy' writing: in physics, for instance, students were asked to write texts for non-specialist audiences, such as Select Committees of MPs, or commercial groups, to 'empathise' with their reader's lack of disciplinary knowledge and at the same time take account of their desire or need to know. In management science mathematical principles were used to address commercial problems, and writing reports for putative clients was an essential part of student writing for assessment. The writing requirements of these exercises differed from those of more standard 'essay text' kinds of writing but the same students may encounter both in their progress through a degree programme.

Despite this variation in modes of writing across disciplines and fields of study, many staff we interviewed were still mainly influenced by specific conceptualisations of their own disciplines or subject areas in their assessments of students' writing. The twin concepts of 'structure' and 'argument' came to the fore in most interviews as being key elements in student writing, terms which we examine more closely below. Even though staff generally had a clear belief in these concepts as crucial to their understanding of what constituted a successful piece of writing, there was less certainty when it came to describing what underlay a well-argued or well-structured piece of student work. More commonly, staff were able to identify when a student had been successful, but could not describe how a particular piece of writing 'lacked' structure. We suggest that, in practice, what makes a piece of student writing 'appropriate' has more to do with issues of epistemology than with the surface features of form to which staff often have recourse when describing their students' writing. That is to say, underlying, often disciplinary, assumptions about the nature of knowledge affected the meaning given to the terms 'structure' and 'argument'. Since these assumptions varied with context, it is not valid to suggest that such concepts are generic and transferable, or represent 'common sense ways of knowing' (Fairclough, 1992), as the reference to 'writing problems' frequently implied. We believe that this finding has considerable implications for current attempts to define generic skills.

The research data, then, suggests that, whilst academic staff can describe what constitutes successful writing, difficulties arose when they attempted to make explicit what a well-developed argument looks like in a written assignment. At the level of form one tutor is able to explain what he wants clearly:

I need my students to have an introduction which sets the scene and a main body which covers a number of issues highlighted in the introduction and introduces economic theory, application and analysis. Students need to be critical, to evaluate, to try and reach some sort of synthesis and then to simply summarise and conclude. You need a good solid introduction leading into your main body and each part of your main body will be crafted and it will link with the next. It will have a professional feel about it and will not describe but will critically analyse and then it will lead into a summary and conclusion.

However, the descriptive tools he employs--`critically analyse, 'evaluate', 'reach a synthesis'--could not be explicated further. As another lecturer put it: 'I know a good essay when I see it but I cannot describe how to write it'. This lends credence to the idea that elements of successful student writing are in essence related to particular ways of constructing the world and not to a set of generic writing skills as the study skills model would suggest. Successful university lecturers are likely to have spent many years developing acceptable ways of constructing their own knowledge through their own writing practices in a variety of disciplinary contexts. Other writers have explicated in some detail how writing practices construct rather than merely reflect academic knowledge (Bazerman, 1988; Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995). These practices, then, are integrally related to the ways in which staff constitute their own academic world-view and their own academic knowledge. Faced with writing which does not appear to make sense within their own academic framework, they are most likely to have recourse to what feel like familiar descriptive categories such as 'structure and argument', 'clarity' and 'analysis', in order to give feedback on their students' writing. In reality their own understandings of these categories may be bound by their own individual, disciplinary perspective, but the categories may be less meaningful outside of this framework and therefore not readily understood by students unversed in that particular orientation of the discipline. Our later analysis of a student essay illustrates this in some detail.

Writing Requirements: student interpretations

The research interviews with students revealed a number of different interpretations and understandings of what students thought that they were meant to be doing in their writing. Students described taking 'ways of knowing' (Baker et al., 1995) and of writing from one course into another only to find that their attempt to do this was unsuccessful and met with negative feedback. They were consciously aware of switching between diverse writing requirements and knew that their task was to unpack what kind of writing any particular assignment might require. This was at a more complex level than genre, such as the 'essay' or 'report', but lay more deeply at the level of writing particular knowledge in a specific academic setting. Students knew that variations of form existed, but admitted that their real writing difficulties lay in trying to gauge the deeper levels of variation in knowledge and how to set about writing them. It was much more than using the correct terminology or just learning to do 'academic writing'--as what we term the academic socialisation model would suggest--and more about adapting previous knowledge of writing practices, academic and other, to varied university settings:

The thing I'm finding most difficult in my first term here is moving from subject to subject and knowing how you're meant to write in each one. I'm really aware of writing for a particular tutor as well as for a particular subject. Everybody seems to want something different. It's very different to A levels where we used dictated notes for essay writing.

Such common descriptions in interviews with students did not appear to support the notion of generic and transferable writing skills across the university.

Students themselves often internalised the language of feedback. They knew that it was important to present an argument and they knew that structure played an important part, but had difficulties in understanding when they had achieved this successfully in a piece of

writing. Students would frequently describe how they had completed a piece of work that they believed was well constructed and appropriate to the subject area, only to discover that they had received a very low grade and fairly negative feedback. They often felt unsure and confused about what they had done wrong. What seemed to be an appropriate piece of writing in one field, or indeed for one individual tutor, was often found to be quite inappropriate for another. Although students frequently had guidelines, either from individual tutors or as departmental documents on essay writing, they found that these often did not help them very much with this level of writing. They felt that such guidelines dealt with matters that they knew from A level or Access courses. The guidelines involved issues broadly defined as structure, such as those concerned with the formal organisation of a piece of writing (introduction, main body, conclusion) or as argument, involving advice on the necessity of developing a position rather than providing 'just' a description or narrative. Students could assimilate this general advice on writing 'techniques' and 'skills' but found it difficult to move from the general to using this advice in a particular text in a particular disciplinary context. In both universities, the majority of the documents offering guidelines of this nature that we analysed took a rather technical approach to writing, concentrating on issues of surface form: grammar, punctuation and spelling. They also dealt fully with referencing, bibliographies and footnotes, and supplied warnings about plagiarism. They rarely dealt with the issues that students reported they had most difficulty grasping--for example, how to write specific, course-based knowledge for a particular tutor or field of study.

The conflicting advice received from academic teaching staff in different courses added to the confusion. For example, in some areas students were specifically directed to outline what would follow in the main body of a traditional essay, whilst other tutors would comment, 'I do not want to know what you are going to say'. Many different conventions were to be found around the use of the first person pronoun in student writing. Even within the same courses, individual tutors had different opinions about when or if it was appropriate to use this. Such conventions were often presented as self-evidently the correct way in which things should be done.

Student perceptions were influenced by their own experiences of writing within and outside higher education. An example of this was the A level entrant who came unstuck when she wrote a history essay drawing on just one textual source as she regularly and successfully had done in English. Similarly, another entrant to the traditional university who had worked in industry for 5 years and was used to extensive, succinct report writing, had no idea how to go about writing a traditional essay text in politics, as part of a course in public administration and management.

Students took different approaches to the course switching that they experienced. Some saw it as a kind of game, trying to work out the rules, not only for a field of study, a particular course or particular assignment, but frequently for an individual tutor. They adopted writing strategies that masked their own opinions, in a sense mimicking some implicit or even explicit convention. There were, for instance, the first year history students who had learnt to hide what they thought behind 'it can be said' rather than using the first person in their writing, and had also learnt how to balance one recognised author against another as a way to present their own personal viewpoint in their writing. On the other hand, a mature student writing social policy felt severely constrained by his inability to bring his years of trade union expertise into his essay on present-day poverty. He did not feel comfortable with the pragmatic approach of playing to the rules of the game, which seemed to require him to simply juxtapose data from different sources and to eschew personal knowledge.

Writing across Courses: 'structure and argument'

We examine here a 'telling case' (Mitchell, 1984) of the problems that these differences in understanding the writing requirements of specific courses can lead to. A first year history student had a strikingly different response from his tutors to an anthropology essay and to a history essay written during the same period in his first year of study. For the history essay, in which the emphasis had been on content and factual information, he received positive feedback, but when he attempted an essay for anthropology using a similar format, he was subject to strong criticism. He felt, however, that he had written a

successful essay in both cases. The feedback from the anthropology lecturer suggested that his difficulties were with general essay-writing skills, although feedback and grades in both history and politics at the same time, as well as his pre-university A level experience, had led him to believe that he could handle academic writing requirements with no real difficulties. The tutor in anthropology was particularly critical of his 'lack' of 'structure and argument' in the anthropology essay. The student, however, could not understand how the essay lacked structure and felt that he had presented a coherent argument in his writing.

We would suggest that the explanation for this divergence of opinion and response lies at a deeper level than the surface features of 'writing' to which the anthropology tutor refers. Rather, the cause of the poor assessment of his essay can be traced, we suggest, to the student's lack of familiarity with the subject matter of anthropology, which was not his major, and to his greater ease with history, which he had studied successfully at A level and was now taking as his major: his experience with writing in history led him to attempt to break down and categorise some factual aspects of his knowledge in his anthropology essay, without attention to some of the implicit ways of writing knowledge in his anthropology, and in particular the need to abstract theory rather than attend to factual detail as evidence, as was required by at least some tutors in that discipline. In our analysis, we attend particularly to the tutor's comments in the margins of the essay, and on the feedback sheet attached to the end.

The essay was on the question, 'Must governments, in order to survive, always claim to be "better" than ordinary people?' In attempting to answer this question, the student had written in one paragraph about 'Principality'--one of the forms of government listed by Aristotle, whom he quoted at the outset. 'Principality', he writes, 'represents the pinnacle of this domination and therefore demands absolute government control'. He gives an example of how individuals may break away from dominant groups, such as those defined by caste and lineage, and assert that they are 'better' (as called for in the title) by being a member of another clan. The paragraph concludes that this 'is evidence of their survival depending on their repressive claim to power through blood/lineage'. The next paragraph opens: 'As in all forms of government "authority" must secure as wide a measure of popular support as it can ...' The following paragraph commences, 'Religion is the most powerful tool with which to obtain "popular support" and therefore survival'. The tutor has written in the margin between the first two paragraphs 'Linkage' (tutor comments in italics here for clarity, but in handwriting in the original) and between the second two paragraphs: 'Too many unlinked facts here. I can't see any argument'.

The student, however, might well assume that the linkage is there but given by the paragraph 'structure' of his essay and by lexical reference back to the title--'better', 'survive'. In the first section he had listed Aristotle's 'six forms' of government. Each section of the essay that follows starts with a reference to one of these forms, e.g. 'Principality', 'Tyranny', 'Aristocracy'. The paragraphs cited above refer to 'Principality', and in keeping with this interpretation of the student's organisation of the essay, the term is the first word in the initial paragraph. The next paragraph, commencing 'Religion is a powerful tool', could be seen as intended to link with the account of 'Principality'. The student refers to anthropological data on the role of clans among the Bemba people, which could be taken as empirical evidence with respect to the question of 'survival' of forms of government: this is summarised in the phrase 'Religion is the most powerful tool with which to obtain "popular support" and therefore survival'--a further reference to the title.

As the essay progresses, different forms of government are indicated: one paragraph begins, 'Principality's downfall is secured by Tyranny'; another, 'Machiavelli saw the constant successional threat of aristocracy in 16th century France in these terms'. The tutor has put a question mark in the margin beside this sentence, presumably further indicating his general concern on this page with 'linkage' and 'argument'. However, the markers of cohesion, such as use of connectives ('these', 'such', 'therefore') and the repetition of key terms from the title ('survival', better', 'government') could be seen as intended to indicate the flow of such an 'argument'--that forms of government attempted to gain support in order to survive but gave way to other forms, which have their ethnographic and empirical correlates in accounts of the Bemba and Shilluck, which are classic cases of political formations in the anthropological literature. The final paragraph states: 'In conclusion irrespective of whether governments claim to be better than ordinary

people, their survival will eventually be undermined by the next form of government'. Here the student has made direct reference back to the title, presumably to create an ending to his essay that is coherent with the opening question.

The tutor's comments in the margins and at the end regarding lack of 'linkage' indicate that these attempts at 'argument' and cohesion have not been recognised. The tutor writes at the end: 'You really have a problem with this essay, mainly for the reason that it is so incoherent. It has no beginning, middle and end, no structure, no argument'. The student is advised to go the university study centre 'and make enquires about essay-writing clinics'. The pathologising of his writing and the references to 'lack' of key components of 'good writing'--'structure', 'argument'--suggest that the student's 'problem' is to do with generic features of essaywriting. And yet the same student received excellent grades and comments for another essay--in history--written in the same week in much the same style and manner. Again the writer uses standard cohesive ties (Hatch, 1995), such as the conjunctions 'therefore' and 'yet' and repetition of key terms from the title, 'economy', 'society', in order to link the conclusion with the initial question and with the flow of the argument. In this case, the tutor has implicitly recognised the work of cohesion and writes: 'I like your conclusion to what is a carefully argued and relevant essay'.

If we interpret the attempts at structure and argument in the way suggested above, then what appears to be at stake can be analysed at two levels. Firstly, the linguistic features of structure and argument are clearly open to interpretation, and what may indicate argument for one person (e.g. cohesive ties, juxtaposition, reference, connectives) may not appear so to another. In this case the anthropology tutor is looking for analysis of each area of content and does not notice the linguistic and structural devices this student has used for indicating 'argument'. Secondly, and following from this last point, what may be at stake is determination of what is involved in a particular discipline--the tutor in this case may see anthropology as requiring different conceptions of knowledge and more to be done with linkage and analysis of concepts, than did the history tutor for whom clear summary of the facts in appropriate sequence was sufficient evidence'of a 'carefully argued and relevant essay'. The anthropology tutor's comments, however, are couched in terms of writing problems, so such epistemological presupposition regarding academic disciplines is hidden beneath more technical attention to supposedly generic features of 'academic writing': 'May I suggest very strongly that you go to the Study Centre and make more enquiries about essay-writing clinics'.

We suggest that the contrast we are making between such writing-focused comments on the one hand, and the deeper epistemological issues associated with knowledge in different disciplines, on the other, might be applied to other examples of staff-student relations in connection with the writing process. Such an approach might open up areas of inquiry and reinterpretation that would revalue much student writing, shift attention from surface features of 'literacy' to deeper features of epistemology and of authority, of the kind indicated above, and perhaps explain much of the miscommunication between tutors and students that is coming to be documented as researchers focus on academic literacies.

Understandings of Plagiarism

A similar area of conflict between different perspectives on the writing process amongst tutors and students concerns the concept of 'plagiarism'. We found reference to 'plagiarism' was identified surprisingly often in the interview comments of both tutors and students, and frequently in the documentation available for students as advice on assignment writing and other course documentation. In both universities there appeared to be an unquestioned assumption that both tutor and student would share the same interpretation and understanding of 'plagiarism'. Our evidence, in common with Ashworth et aL (1997), would suggest that we cannot assume this to be the case. Students often expressed anxieties about plagiarism in terms of their own authority as writers. They were unclear about what actually constituted plagiarism and yet at the same time were concerned about how to acknowledge the authority of academic texts. Their overriding concerns were that the texts they read were authoritative and that they as students had little useful to say. They were confused, not only about the conventions for referencing, but more importantly they found it difficult to understand the implicit relationship between acknowledging the source of the text and acknowledging the authority of the text. Their

concerns lay more with the latter and how they as novice students could write anything that they had not read in an authoritative source:

I don't know anything about the subject other than what I've read in books so how on earth could I write anything which was not someone else's idea?

For this student, as with others, the relationship between plagiarism and correct referencing was not transparent and he was worried that he would plagiarise unknowingly. For academics, the issue of referencing sources seems clear; for students the boundary between their sources and their own account is less certain as they feel, like the student quoted here, that all of their knowledge is implicated in others' texts. Indeed, some tutors did express concern during the interviews about student interpretations of plagiarism that recognised this uncertainty.

However, at an institutional level plagiarism was treated as clearly definitive and unquestionable. In one particular instance, a standard feedback sheet for tutors to comment on student essays gave considerable attention to plagiarism in a document that was necessarily constrained for space and where the choice of topic in relation to student writing is therefore highly significant. Even if the emphasis on plagiarism evident here could be construed as a valid aspect of a document offering advice and feedback to students learning to write, the discourse here is that of the law and authority rather than of tutor and student engaged in the learning practices of educational discourse:

PLAGIARISM is an assessment offence (see section 3.7-3.9 of University Assessment Regulations pp. 26-27 in Student regulations). A student who knowingly allows his/her work to be copied, either verbatim or by paraphrasing, will be guilty of an assessment offence.

In this same university, whilst interviewing tutors, we observed notices warning against plagiarism on the walls of tutors' offices and on the notice boards in corridors. Whatever the formal and legal issues involved, as a social practice this focus upon the term plagiarism itself and the legalistic discourse in which it is embedded affirms the disciplinary and surveillance aspects of the writing process. This discourse reinforces the relations of tutor to student as those of authority, backed by the heavy weight of an institution with boards, regulations and ultimately, legal resources.

Student Writing: interpreting feedback

So far, we have attempted to outline some of the indications in the research data for conceptualising variety in the different interpretations and understandings of student writing we encountered. These variations exist within and across courses, subjects and disciplines-and between students and academic tutors in many different contexts. They are constituted both in the linguistic form of the texts--the written assignments and the accompanying feedback--and in the social relations that exist around them--the relationships of power and authority between tutor and student--and they are manifest in the divergent literacy practices surrounding written texts. Central to our understanding of both the varieties of academic literacy practices which students engage in across the university and the relations which surround text production is an examination of the ways in which written feedback is interpreted by staff and students.

As we have illustrated, the research has been concerned with a textual examination of tutor-written feedback on student work--both on standard feedback sheets and in the margins of assignments--and with students' interpretations of the meanings that they attach to this feedback, both in general and in relation to a specific piece of written work. This analysis has raised questions about the relationship between feedback and epistemological issues of knowledge construction. How is feedback being used to direct students to develop and write their academic knowledge in very specific ways within particular courses which are implicitly presented as 'common-sense ways of knowing'? We have already illustrated a feedback genre within which the use of descriptive categories-- such as 'structure' and `argument'--may embed contrasting conceptual understandings. As we have suggested, such terms tend to be rather elusive, particularly for students, and

may be more usefully understood in their gatekeeping role or at a more complex ideological level within an institutional hierarchy than as the unproblematic generic requirements of student writing.

One useful way of examining the relationships surrounding texts may be to start by examining the feedback that staff give to students as a genre. By examining some of the genres of students' written work and the genre of staff feedback on it we may be able to make more sense of the complex ways in which staff and students construct appropriate ways of knowing and reproduce appropriate forms of disciplinary and subject knowledge. There is a dynamic within the feedback genre, for instance, which works both to construct academic knowledge and to maintain relationships of power and authority between novice student and experienced academic. Assumptions about what constitutes valid knowledge may be inferred by analysing feedback but frequently such assumptions remain implicit, as in the feedback on the essay analysed above.

The ways in which a speaker or writer indicate their implicit commitment to the truth of what is being said--what linguists refer to as 'modality'--varies with types of text and social relations. Tutor comments frequently take the form of what we term categorical modality, using imperatives and assertions, with little mitigation or qualification. The first page of the essay analysed above has the following comments: 'Explain', 'A bit confused', 'Linkage?', 'Too many unlinked facts here. Can't see argument'. This categorical modality is also expressed here and frequently in the essays we have seen, by means of orthographic marks such as '?', '!' or '(', that indicate disagreement, doubt, criticism. The question mark frequently indicates not a genuine question which tutor and student are engaged in explicating, but rather is used as a kind of expletive, or as a categorical assertion that the point is not 'correct'. In the essay in question there are seven unattached question marks, many with this function, and six bracket signs indicating links that should have been made, in the space of 31 pages. One has only to imagine other kinds of modality that could be expressed in this context to recognise the conventional and categorical nature of this usage: mitigated comments such as 'you might like to consider', 'have you thought about', 'in my opinion ...', 'perhaps', and open-ended questions such as 'could this be interpreted differently?', 'is there a link with other comments here?', would evoke a different modality (more provisional or mitigated), create a different genre and evoke a different interpersonal relationship between student as writer and tutor as marker than that indicated by the comments we have described above. In making these comments the tutor clearly and firmly takes authority, assumes the right to criticise directly and categorically on the basis of an assumed 'correct' view of what should have been written and how. Students, however, may have a different interpretation of feedback comments. For the anthropology student in question he could not understand how to make sense of the feedback comment 'Meaning?' on his text. For him both the meaning of what he was saying and the development of the argument in his own text was clear. Even where students indicate in interviews that they did not understand the comment, thought it unfair or even disagreed with it, few if any challenge the tutor's right to make such comments. It appears, then, that written feedback on student work, is not merely an attempt at communication, or at learning a 'discipline', or at socialisation into a community--although it clearly has elements of all of these--but is also embedded in relationships of authority as a marker of difference and a sustainer of boundaries.

Additionally, institutional procedures were implicated in the ways in which students were able to read, understand and make use of feedback on their work. In the new university, where a fully modular system was in operation, it was reported to us by both staff and students alike that in many instances students did not receive feedback on assessed written work until they had completed their studies for this module. Inevitably, students found that they were unable to benefit from receiving feedback in this manner. Since they generally found feedback comments to be specific to a particular piece of work, or at the least to the module being studied, they reported that such feedback frequently bore no relationship to their studies in the subsequent module. Academic staff reported that they were unable to make best use of standard feedback sheets because these were received by students after module completion:

The problem with the modular system is that every piece of work they [the students] do is for assessment purposes. It is not until they are well into the second module that they get the results from the first. Effectively there is no feedback.

Evidence such as this has led us to suggest that we consider the analysis of writing in the university as an 'institutional' issue and not just a matter for particular participants. The institution within which tutors and students write defines the conventions and boundaries of their writing practices, through its procedures and regulations (definitions of plagiarism, requirements of modularity and assessment procedures etc.), whatever individual tutors and students may believe themselves to be as writers, and whatever autonomy and distinctiveness their disciplines may assert.

Future Directions

Our research indicates the variety in both the writing practices that students engage with as part of their university courses and the complex nature of the feedback they receive from tutors. These writing practices and genres are not simply concerned with technical matters in which 'appropriate' skills are acquired and novices become members of an expert community, as in the first two models described in the appendix. The third model, that of academic literacies (from which we are viewing these data), suggests a more complex and contested interpretation in which the processes of student writing and tutor feedback are defined through implicit assumptions about what constitutes valid knowledge within a particular context, and the relationships of authority that exist around the communication of these assumptions. The nature of this authority and the claims associated with it can be identified through both formal, linguistic features of the writing involved and in the social and institutional relationships associated with it.

During the course of the research we have identified three thematic categories originating from both students and staff as ways of looking at students' writing. The first is focused on the student and suggests that students lack a set of basic skills that can be dealt with primarily in a remedial study skills or learning support unit. This takes no account of the interaction of the student with institutional practices and is based on the underlying principle that knowledge is transferred rather than mediated or constructed through writing practices. The second, identified most clearly by students, is derived from the interaction of student and tutor and is concerned with issues such as student and tutor assumptions and understandings of assignment titles, tutor feedback on students' written work and, for the students themselves, the importance of their own 'identity' as writers rather than simply the acquisition of skills in becoming an academic writer. The third theme is at a broadly institutional level and concerns the implications of modularity, assessment and university procedures on student writing.

We suggest that these three themes, focused broadly on students, student-tutor interactions, and the institution, need to be examined more fully against the changing 'fields of study' and student 'course switching' to which we have referred. All three, we argue, are located in relations of power and authority and are not simply reducible to the skills and competences required for entry to, and success within, the academic community. The current movement away from traditional academic disciplines and subject areas, within which academic staff have conceptualised their own and their students' writing practices, makes a broader perspective critical in understanding the 'problems' being identified in student writing. Without such a perspective, such problems tend to be explained mainly with respect to the students themselves or seen as a consequence of the mass introduction of 'nontraditional' students. From an academic literacies perspective such explanations are limited and will not provide the basis for reflection on learning and teaching in higher education that the Dearing Report and others are calling for. Exploration of these themes within an academic literacies perspective may provide, we suggest, a fruitful area for research and for teacher education in higher education in the coming years.

Correspondence: Mary R. Lea, Research Fellow in Student Learning, Institute of Educational Technology, The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes MK7 6AA, UK.

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Appendix. Models of student writing in higher education

Study skills:

Student deficit

- 'Fix it'; atomised skills; surface language, grammar, spelling.

- Sources: behavioural and experimental psychology; programmed learning.

Student writing as technical and instrumental skill.
Academic socialisation:
Acculturation of students into academic discourse

- Inducting students into new 'culture'; focus on orientation to learning and interpretation of learning task, e.g. 'deep', 'surface', 'strategic' learning; homogeneous 'culture', lack of focus on institutional practices, change and power.
- Sources: social psychology; anthropology; constructivism.

Student writing as transparent medium of representation.
Academic literacies
Student's negotiation of conflicting literacy practices

- Literacies as social practices; at level of epistemology and identities; institutions as sites of/constituted in discourses and power; variety of communicative repertoire, e.g. genres, fields, disciplines; switching with regard to linguistic practices, social meanings and identities.
- Sources: 'new literacy studies'; critical discourse analysis; systemic functional linguistics; cultural anthropology.

Student writing as meaning-making and contested.
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By MARY R. LEA Institute of Educational Technology, Open University, UK and BRIAN V. STREET King's College, London, UK