

# Introduction

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**Students Writing in the University: Cultural and epistemological issues**

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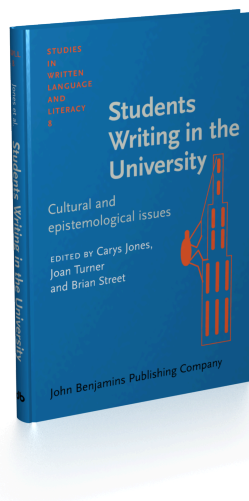
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# **Introduction**

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## **Focus**

With the expansion of higher education in a number of countries (UK; US; S. Africa etc.) attention is being focussed increasingly on the ‘problems’ students face in meeting the writing requirements of the academy. The present volume attempts to address these issues from a broader perspective than that evident in the dominant approaches where study skills are stressed at the expense of deeper, cultural and epistemological issues. Through detailed case studies of staff student encounters around the writing process, the authors bring to light underlying features of academic life that have tended to be taken for granted. This includes treating learning as a social practice rather than an individual act and giving voice to both tutors and students regarding their particular social as well as personal viewpoints on what is often framed and conceptualised for them by the institution. Although the data addressed includes ‘problems’ faced by overseas students and non-native English speakers in UK universities at both undergraduate and graduate level, the articles do not necessarily take at face value the dominant notion of ‘problems’; rather they seek to locate the issue of student writing and faculty response in broader institutional contexts taking account of their cultural and epistemological underpinnings. This shifts attention away from the current concern with why students from ‘non-traditional’ backgrounds — whether in terms of class or country — do not easily access academic discourse, and instead asks less judgmental questions about ‘what is going on’ when students write in Higher Education and what are the underlying assumptions about knowledge and about tutor/student relations that inform such processes. Similarly, the papers in this volume raise broader questions about the issue of assessment of student writing, by both staff and students themselves; the significance of different domains of

practice for how writing is construed, such as subject disciplines, English for Academic Purposes, Writing Across the Curriculum and other practices. The focus on relations between the parties involved — tutors, staff and administrators — shifts attention from ‘blame’ and from judgement towards understanding the social processes in which the production of texts and the deployment of different language registers take on significance. Finally, attention is directed not only to immediate participants involved in the writing process — tutors and students — but also to the institution as a whole as the context within which these practices are embedded. This approach also facilitates some comparison of attitudes towards academic writing in different institutional and national contexts and one article addresses this issue with respect to College writing in the UK and the US.

### **Cultural and Epistemological Issues**

At the theoretical and methodological level the book breaks new ground by approaching the issues and case data as social and discursive practices and by raising the question of power relations and how to conceptualise and describe them. These debates are placed in the context of functional, cultural and critical approaches to the study of writing. In all of the papers, close linguistic and discourse analysis is related to broader social and institutional interpretations: the authors variously offer ways of addressing the relationship between agency and subjectivity on the one hand and the constitution of institutions through discursive practices on the other. A key argument throughout is that the level at which we should be rethinking higher education and its writing practices should not simply be that of skills and effectiveness but rather of epistemology — what counts as knowledge and who has authority over it; of identity — what the relation is between forms of writing and the constitution of self and agency; and of power — how partial and ideological positions and claims are presented as neutral and as given through the writing requirements and processes of feedback and assessment that make up academic activity. A number of the authors attend to the nature of mystery and transparency in such activity and the volume as a whole attempts to make visible what is often hidden, to provide a language and a method for penetrating the opaque surface of higher educational institutions and practices. One consequence of adopting such a broader, more theoretically based approach to student writing might be that the field of ‘academic writing’ support may be treated less as a remedial ghetto and taken more seriously as a central location in the construction of the academy itself and therefore as a major field of research and theory in its own right.

In terms of expectations of the academy and the contributions it can make, the issues involved are signalled as inevitably wide-ranging, deep, interlinked and crucially important to an evolutionary concept of higher education in an 'international' and 'intercultural' world. Through its discussions about students' writing, the book as a whole seeks to raise awareness of the changing nature of the academy in a global environment. The changes that are taking place in the composition of the student body and in the global links amongst knowledge workers can be viewed as a shift in the direction of 'cultural hybridity'. Instead of the academy representing itself as a homogenous and unified entity, to which outsiders must seek access through learning its ways, there is now more negotiation to be held between the particular institution's processes and discourses on the one hand and, on the other, the uniqueness of students' individual cultural and linguistic-related histories. In this new environment, the latter play a highly influential part in the institution's identity and the authors of this volume see this diversity as a source of enrichment. In this perspective, all the members of the academy are linked through their awareness of the institution of learning as an on-going, dynamic process to be shared by all those involved — administrators, lecturers, tutors and students — rather than as a given source of knowledge and regulations determined by a few in authority. This shared awareness entails a reciprocal understanding of others' world views as valuable in itself to the extent that fear of destabilisation of the individual and of the institution are perceived as, and are, non-threatening. The view of knowledge as process and of authority as multi-faceted suggests a different way of viewing the writing requirements of higher education and leads to new insights that might help explain the apparent 'problems' faced by some student writers as they encounter this changing environment.

The discussions, then, examine students' writing as a distinctive process set against institutional expectations: a process which is crucial to the nurturing of diverse intercultural perspectives. The authors' findings suggest that the university might be more open to change, to being shaped and reshaped by its various members. They highlight the need to avoid surface judgements being made about students' intentions through their writing and to search for deeper understandings. Some of the authors discuss how alternative perceptions of the issues can emerge and how misunderstandings of what writing means against this more complex background can be damaging. Lea, writing from the academic literacies approach outlined below, suggests two approaches to student writing amongst mature adults writing assignments for open University courses: the 'reformulation of texts' approach involves treating source texts as knowledge to be re presented in the students' own words; the 'challenging texts' approach involves the student relating their own experience and their other reading in the literature to the

particular text in front of them, which often leads to questioning and challenging of the knowledge presented there. However, differences may arise here with the tutor, whose own view of the text and of how the student should represent it, may focus on the closeness of the writing to the source text rather than the struggles the student is making to challenge it. Such differences and sometimes misunderstandings associated with them — regarding what is knowledge, what is learning, what is writing — may lead to faculty and student frustration. Both English and Lillis, for instance, point out the damaging effects on students of misunderstandings about the often implicit requirements of the institution: they point out, for instance, how misunderstandings can occur in tasks such as the writing of assignments. English suggests that shared awareness is enhanced by discourse knowledge. She discusses how discourse is presented, then interpreted, in ways which differ from the intended meaning. Lillis shows how the validity of assessed essays can be challenged through the way questions are formulated and how students' struggles to interpret the question compounds their problems. Hermerschmidt, in her case-study, relates misunderstanding to power issues: she argues that opportunities for students to be understood by those in power are too few and too limited so that students become aware that they need to play a game which panders to the powerful rather than become wholly committed to developing their own academic paths. Scott too discusses how students become agents of their own subjectivity, aware of how they may be interpreted by others so that they develop their own hidden discourses. Gay, Jones & Jones present the perspectives of subject tutors as grounded in the cultural dominance of the institution, which can act to disempower students engaged in their studies. Davidson and Tomic signal how different cultural practices can be in their discussion of the US tradition in writing practices as contrasted with the British EAP culture.

English, Lillis, Low & Woodburn, and Jones, in their case-study approaches, all suggest that awareness is enhanced when opportunities are created for discussing intended and interpreted meanings. Low & Woodburn show how Grice's Co-operative Principle can be used to illuminate cultural problems of discourse. Jones discusses how a task-based approach might encourage problems of hidden discourse to be brought to the surface. Taking a more general stance, Turner argues that a shared understanding leads to a more critical awareness of the dominance and lack of transparency of institutional discourse. She highlights how traditional practices have deceptively developed a culture where awareness of hidden meanings of discourse has been discouraged and backgrounded. Street argues the case for acknowledging the complex epistemological issues which underlie students' writing as a process and product rather than as skills alone, as

in much dominant discourse. His contribution consists of a series of disparate comments linked by their reference to a common stimulus — a short piece by Street on ‘Academic Literacy’. This short piece was originally written as a result of his own experience of trying to make explicit to students his own assumptions about ‘academic literacy’; it was circulated amongst groups of colleagues and at some workshops on the subject, and a number of people then responded in writing. These have been deliberately left in their original form rather than incorporated into Street’s own summary, in order to draw attention to the genre and to force the reader to re-consider what we take for granted there, such as the traditional format and layout of the ‘essay-text’. Focusing on this challenging note questions the very bases of what counts as ‘writing’ in the University: by locating the debate at the level of cultural and epistemological issues, the authors hope to provide a broader context in which to consider student writing both as a research issue and in terms of policy (cf. Creme & Lea 1997).

### **Models of Student Writing in Higher Education**

Many of the authors in this volume draw upon the models of student writing provided in a recent paper by Lea & Street (1998), based on their research into perceptions of writing in some UK universities. Lea & Street distinguish between three models of student writing — study skills, academic socialisation and ‘academic literacies’ — and suggest that, whilst the narrow study skills approach has been generally superseded by a socialisation view, this too often still involves narrow interpretations of the learning process and the writing requirements associated with it. They advocate an academic literacies approach that allows a broader, more institutional and socially-sensitive understanding of the processes in which writing in higher education is embedded. The notion of academic literacies has been developed from the area of ‘new literacy studies’ as an attempt to draw out the implications of this approach for our understanding of issues of student learning. The three models (see Figure 1) are not mutually exclusive, and the authors who use them in this volume, like Lea & Street, 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, they 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 described below and likewise the academic literacies approach encapsulates the academic socialisation model, building on the insights developed there as well as the study skills view.

### 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*

inculcating students into new ‘culture’; focus on student 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:**

*students’ 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 re: linguistic practices, social meanings and identities

sources: ‘New Literacy Studies’; Critical Discourse Analysis; Systemic Linguistics; Cultural Anthropology

>*student writing as constitutive and contested*

Figure 1. (from Lea & Street 1998)

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 below. This perspective, then, involves a hierarchical view of the relationship between the three models, privileging the ‘academic literacies’ approach conceptually but not sequentially. It follows from this view 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 an entirely different meaning 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 a set of lenses through which to view the accounts of student writing presented in this volume, although as we argue below, not every author necessarily starts from here or themselves subscribes to the framework.

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 has led to refinement of the meaning of 'skills' involved and attention to broader issues of learning and social context, what Lea & Street (1998) have termed the academic socialisation approach.

From the academic socialisation perspective, the task of the tutor/advisor is to inculcate 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' and 'surface' learning. The sources of this perspective lie in social psychology, in anthropology and in constructivist education. Although more sensitive to both 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 homogenous 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, are not sufficiently theorised. Despite the fact that contextual factors in student writing are recognised as important (Hounsell 1984; Taylor 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 academic literacies approach sees literacies as social practices, in ways analogous to the cross-cultural accounts of literacies provided by researchers in the New Literacy Studies (Barton & Hamilton 1998; Barton 1994; Street 1984, 1993; Heath 1984). It views student writing and learning as issues at the level of epistemology and identities rather than skill or socialisation (Lea, this volume). 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, or the focus on text types typical of the genre approach (Berkenkotter & Huckin 1995), comes, then, from the social and ideological orientation of the 'New Literacy Studies'. Allied to this is work in Critical Discourse Analysis, Systemic Linguistics and Cultural Anthropology which has come to see student writing as constitutive and contested rather than as skills or deficits. There is a growing body of literature based upon this approach, which suggests that one explanation for student writing problems might be the gaps between academic staff expectations and student interpretations of what is involved in student writing (Cohen 1993; Lea 1994; Lea & Street 1998; Bazerman 1988; Geisler 1994).

## **Mystery and Transparency**

None of the authors in this volume adhere rigidly to any one model — rather the models facilitate understanding of the different dimensions of both research and practice in this area. But each paper in some ways demonstrates features of the different models as they work through particular institutional writing practices — whether giving a paper, writing an essay, taking an exam or interpreting tutor feedback. All of the papers recognise the extent to which such practices relate to underlying value systems, so that academic writing is seen not simply as a 'skill' but also as an expression of cultural values and beliefs and of epistemological standpoints that often remain hidden. Different authors approach these issues in different ways, and from different vantage points. A major point in the writing process at which such issues arise is in staff commentary and feedback on students' work. Lea, by using the academic literacies approach in her own research on adult students at the Open University, opens up aspects of assignment writing

and faculty feedback that otherwise may not be noticed: for instance, the merging of students' own experiences from broader social contexts with the university's requirements involves issues of epistemology and of identity not always addressed in the two dominant models — skills and socialisation. Lillis, by her reference to the 'institutional practice of mystery', emphasises the extent to which the values that underlie faculty responses are often hidden from the student, while English notes their opacity for the L2 student struggling to gain more than borderline success in her essays. The cross-cultural dimension of how differing academic cultures affect the understanding of underlying evaluative criteria also features strongly in Low & Woodburn's account of a Japanese student's presentation of his research interests in a British university context. They show how transfer from his own cultural context can affect the success and reception of such performance. Jones similarly stresses the importance of helping L2 students negotiate the expectations of the academic community while developing their own self awareness, self esteem, and self assertion within that community. Hermerschmidt 'foregrounds' the frequent lack of acknowledgement of such aspects of student background and Lillis also underlines the feeling of students that their voice and experience are not taken into account.

The gap that some of the authors document between faculty and student expectations is partly explained by the way in which the culturally embedded nature of assessment and evaluation criteria can be so taken-for-granted that terms such as 'clarity', 'structure' and 'argument' which are used to signal them are left unexplicated. Turner refers to Polanyi's notion of 'tacit knowledge' to explain such non-explication, whilst Street's discussion with colleagues of 'academic literacies' also brings out theoretical and strategic issues regarding 'explicitness'. Lillis's illustration of what might seem a paradoxical confusion surrounding the injunction 'be explicit' combined with what she terms the 'monologic space' between tutor and student, whereby students are deterred from asking for clarification on such injunctions, further emphasises the need for a sustained focus on the gap between an institutionalised metalanguage of evaluation and the understanding of its epistemological, pedagogical, linguistic, and rhetorical assumptions.

It is such a sustained focus that the present book provides. It attempts to make visible, and to provide a language of description for, the processes that underlie student writing and student/staff relations around writing in the institutional contexts of modern higher education. Through detailed case studies of the kind developed here we might begin to 'see' more of what is going on in these contexts, to understand richer dimensions of the writing process and perhaps begin to explain some of the points of contestation and misunderstanding that underlie many of the difficulties associated with writing in the University.

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