Joelle Adams
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How can I investigate the influence of 'identity' on student writing at the transition from foundation to honours degree level?

Introduction

This enquiry grows out of my interest in the teaching of academic writing in the UK higher education (henceforth HE) system. Coming from a North American context, where 'composition pedagogy' is an established field of study and dedicated writing centres exist in most universities, it has taken three years for me to build an understanding of the contexts, ideas, prejudices, assumptions, theories, and practices involved in teaching academic writing in British universities. I have begun to question not only the role of writing in academia, but also the issues writing raises about power, authority, identity, and the purpose and role of higher education in society. Now that I have been teaching in the UK HE system for three years I feel ready to use my experience and intellectual tools to critically reflect, ask focused and relevant questions, improve my own practice, and share ideas with and influence colleagues.

As Coordinator of the Student Study Skills Centre at Bath Spa University, I began with the intention to investigate ways I could help students transition more easily from writing at foundation degree level to writing at honours level; however, I quickly realised that implicit in that aim was an assumption that there was indeed a problem to be addressed. Therefore, I decided to first investigate how I could best research students' perceptions of academic writing at this transition phase; specifically I wanted to understand how the students' perceptions of themselves might influence their ability to adapt to changing expectations.

The research will form the basis for 3 papers: one submitted for consideration for the Writing Development in Higher Education conference (see Appendix 6 for a copy of the submitted proposal), which will focus on the experience of student writing at the transition to higher education; one to be presented at the Canadian Association of Teachers of Technical Writing conference (see Appendix 5 for a copy of the accepted proposal), which will focus on any differences in the expectations and understandings between students and instructors; and one to be submitted for consideration for the Education Subject Centre's conference 'The Teaching – Research Interface: Implications for Practice in HE and FE'. As such, the research needs to be designed to a professional standard that will allow me to authoritatively make and defend claims amongst my UK and international colleagues.

Therefore, I ask the following questions: how can I investigate the influence of identity on student writing at the transition from foundation to honours degree level? What is the context of my enquiry; what are the appropriate research methods and methodologies; what are the potential problems associated with the research and how will the research work in practice?

The Changing Context of Higher Education in the UK

It is important to consider the context in which the research will be conducted, evaluated, disseminated, and used. The UK higher education system is undergoing a major shift from an elite institution for the privileged to an integral part of the training and education of the 'masses' (Lea and Street, 1998). Known as 'widening participation', or 'widening access', elements of this shift include government targets, policies, and initiatives, along with institutional commitments and a changing culture in and around higher education. One indication of this shift is the government's target of 50% of 18-30 year olds having some form of HE experience by 2010 (Leitch 2006). Modularisation of degree programmes means that students are often writing in different disciplines as part of their course, which requires understanding the expectations of more than one discourse community[1]. As such, students in higher education will have diverse 'identities' that could influence their experiences of academic writing.

Student participants in the study will have completed a foundation degree, which are two-year programmes that 'integrate academic and work-based learning', are 'designed in partnership with employers' and are often delivered in partnership contexts between higher education and further education institutions (Foundation Degree Forward, 2007). For example, Bath Spa University offers foundation degrees in several partnership colleges in subjects such as Early Years Education, Broadcast Media, and Counselling. As foundation degrees do not always require traditional academic qualifications, students on these courses may have unique senses of identity and face challenges that other, 'traditional' students (those who have entered the academy straight from their A-level qualifications) might be better prepared to meet.

Academic Writing and Identity

Lea and Street's 1998 article 'Student Writing in Higher Education: an academic literacies approach' proposes an influential way of conceptualising the teaching of academic writing in higher education. Lea and Street argue that the teaching of academic writing needs to go beyond the skills approach, or simply socialising students to the context of the academy to consider the implications of identity, power relationships, and epistemology on student writing in higher education. As the academic literacies framework develops as a theory, there has increasingly been a call for moving the theory into the practice of teaching academic writing (Lillis 2003, Haggis 2003 and Wingate 2006).

This enquiry aims to help me contribute to the movement of academic literacies from theory to practice by drawing on Ivanič's and Lillis's focus on the relationship between students' identities and their experience of academic writing. In *Student Writing: Access, Regulation, Desire*, which is the result of four years of research with student-writers, Lillis concludes that 'as student-writers struggle to construct what they think may count as knowledge within academia, they draw on dominant discourses from their previous and current personal, educational, and professional

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[1] See Ivanič 1998 pp. 78-83 for an overview of the idea of discourse communities.

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experiences' (2001:161); from my own experience both as a student and as an educator, I know this to be true. This enquiry aims to help me understand how I can research the effect of the 'personal, educational, and professional experiences' on the academic writing of a small, specific group of students at a UK 'teaching-led' university.

In *Writing and Identity* Ivanič (1998) outlines four aspects of self: the autobiographical self, the discoursal self, the self as author, and the possibilities for self-hood in the socio-cultural and institutional context (pp. 24-29). 'Autobiographical self' relates to the students' history – the events that shape their life story. 'Discoursal self' is the persona the student-writer adapts when writing – the 'voice' they want their audience to hear. 'Self as author' relates to the student-writers' willingness to make claims and/or their reliance on external authorities to support those claims. Finally, 'possibilities for self-hood in the socio-cultural and institutional contexts' relates to the circumstances in which students are expected to write. The proposed research will use these aspects of self as a framework for investigating students' experience of academic writing at the transition from foundation to honours degree level.

The point of transition under investigation has several possibilities in terms of student identity: there will have been one shift from the identity as a person not involved in HE in any way, to a student studying on an HE course but in a further education (FE) college, to a student studying at honours degree level on an HE campus: whilst the students may have been introduced to a particular discourse community, they may have to re-establish their sense of place within another discourse community upon the transition.

Research Methodology

To begin outlining and rationalising the research design, the question is restated: what is the influence of identity on student writing at the transition from foundation to honours degree level? Notice the use of the word 'influence'; although the original wording was 'effect', upon reflection and discussion with peers and supervisors the word 'influence' emerged as more suitable for the project because 'effect' suggested a statistically significant corelational relationship between 'identity' and student success with student writing. Trying to 'prove' that effect was deemed difficult, if not impossible, due to the complications of trying to control complex and intricate variables based on students' life experience.

The concept of 'identity' was another term that raised some difficulties in the research design. In discussion with peers and supervisors, the term 'educational identity' inspired interest and passion; however, upon reflection, it is not only the 'educational' part of students' identity that I am interested in exploring in this study, but rather the students' perceptions of themselves as people, as parts of society and in relation to other students. For the purposes of this particular enquiry, I think that the term 'identity' is suitable, not least because it is the term used by Lillis and Ivanič in the studies upon which this research is modelled.

Similarly, the idea for an ethnographic approach grew out of my review of the literature on student writing in UK higher education. In particular, the influential work of Lea and Street (1998), Lillis' studies and attempts to move Lea and Street's framework from critique to design (2001 and 2003) and Ivanič's investigations into student identity (1998) are all located in an ethnographic tradition; reviewing these studies helped me understand the value and importance of the student 'voice' in educational research and I would like to add to the body of work that respects students' perceptions and reacts to their needs rather than simply prescribing an accepted practice.

There are several understandings underpinning ethnographic research which directly relate to the enquiry in question: first, in their discussion of ethnography, Cohen et al outline the idea that 'humans actively construct their own meanings' (2007: 177); this research assumes that the students and staff will attach their own meanings to the language in both the texts and dialogues related to student writing. Second, broadly, there is an understanding about context within ethnography, that meaning is partially constructed by contexts and situations and that realities are multiple (ibid). The proposed research *relies* on this understanding: that staff and students may have very different conceptions of the same assignment. Most importantly, ethnographic research examines 'situations through the eyes of the participants' (Cohen et al, 2007: 167): this research does not only focus on the 'product' of student writing (ie. the assignments or grades) or the perceived 'problem' of student writing (McMahon 2004), but asks the participants to explain their perceptions of writing at different stages of their academic careers.

Perhaps a more accurate description of the proposed research's approach is *critical ethnography*. According to Cohen et al, while ethnography is primarily concerned with understanding a situation from the point of view of the 'native' or 'insider', critical ethnography builds on this 'naturalistic' form of research but is specifically 'concerned with the exposure of oppression and inequality in society with a view to emancipating individuals and groups towards collective empowerment' (2007: 186). Because 'research methodology springs, to some extent, from the way we see the world' (Wisker, 2008: 65), I chose to take a critical ethnographic approach to this research: as a 'non-traditional' university student myself, in that I grew up in a working-class family and interrupted my studies to work and returned to finish my undergraduate degree as a mature student, I have a personal interest in helping students in widening participation cohorts fully participate in an academic context which does not always necessarily recognise their diverse needs and abilities. Whilst this particular project in and of itself does not have the capacity to change students' experiences, resultant action research projects will aim to positively influence students' experiences of academic writing.

I am ideally suited to conduct this ethnographic research project because I do not see the students as 'others' because I was a 'non-traditional' student myself. That is not to suggest that there may be difficulties with this approach: for example, as a member of staff I am certainly not an impartial 'insider' in the students' community, nor, as I do not teach any modules, I am not an 'insider' for the staff either. However, in being aware of potential biases I may have a result of my role as a study skills

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tutor, I can take care not to make assumptions or let preconceived ideas influence my investigation.

Although ethnography is traditionally associated with fieldwork in disciplines such as cultural anthropology, the key here is that by interviewing students I am trying to understand how the expectations of the socio-cultural and institutional contexts in which students write might contain barriers for those with certain aspects of identity.

Research Methods and Tools for Data Collection

The main two methods of data collection will be interviews and documentary analysis. Because interviews 'enable participants…to discuss their interpretations of the world in which they live, and to express how they regard situation from their own point view (Cohen et al, 2007: 349), they are the ideal tool for ethnographic research and this enquiry in particular. The enquiry will use an interview style situated between the 'interview guide' and the 'standardized open-ended' (Patton, 1980 in Cohen et al, 2007: 353) approaches, best described as 'semi-structured' because interviews in this style 'manage to address both the need for comparable responses – that is, the same question being asked of each interviewee – and the need for the interview to be developed by the conversation (Wisker 2008: 195). In addition, in *Student Writing* Lillis describes a dialogic approach (2001: 10), which involves 'talkback' (as opposed to written 'feedback') around pieces of student writing. Talking to students about their experiences of writing specific texts will help me analyse their discoursal selves and selves as authors. For example, I might ask why a student chose to make a claim in their own words rather than ascribe an external source of authority, which will help me understand how that student see him/herself in the context of that writing experience.

Each aspect of self (as identified by Ivanič, 1998) will be investigated through either an interview or the analysis of documentation: Appendix 1 outlines the interview questions for student participants. First, the autobiographical self, which relates to the students' 'sense of roots, of where they are coming from' (Ivanič 1998, pg. 24), will be investigated through questions 1-4, which are about the student's life so far and their concept of themselves. Second, the 'discoursal self' is 'the impression…which [the writer] consciously or unconsciously conveys of themselves in a particular written text' (Ivanič, 1998; pg. 25); this aspect of self will be investigated through analysis of one or more pieces of student writing in conjunction with a conversation with the student writer – asking the student why they made particular linguist and stylistic choices (question 5). Third, the 'self as author', the level of authority the author conveys in a particular text, will be determined by the extent the student presents his/herself or others as authoritative; a piece of student writing will be examined with the student to determine how much of the text is referenced as someone else's work and how the student positions him/herself as someone making a claim (question 6). Finally, the possibilities for self-hood in the socio-cultural and institutional context will be examined by determining that context through analysis of institutional documentation (module handbooks, assignment instructions, marking schemes and guidelines, etc.) and by asking students about their perceptions of the contexts in which they write (question 7).

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The staff interview (Appendix 2) also concentrates on the 'socio-cultural and institutional contexts' in which the students are expected to write. Staff will be asked about their conceptions of the purposes, expectations, and privileging of student writing in the context in which they teach. Staff will also be asked to describe how they communicate expectations by reviewing documents such as course handbooks and assignment instructions (question 2b).

The choice of interviewees was determined by a number of factors. The Early Years Foundation degree is one of the most established at Bath Spa University (where the research is taking place); therefore, the tutors teaching in both the further and higher education institutions can speak confidently about their expectation of student writing in each context. The Early Years programme is also very interdisciplinary, which means it requires students to write in a variety of genres (eg: traditional rhetorical essays, reflective writing) and discourse communities (changing between different subject areas). In addition, the programme has a high number of students, which makes it easier to find willing participants. Staff were contacted through the Early Years Coordinator (EYC) and potential student participants have been asked respond to an online advertisement on the university's internal course management system. Two members of staff from each context (FE and HE) will be interviewed, along with four to six students who have transitioned from studying on a foundation degree in an FE college to studying honours degree level at Bath Spa University.

The interviews will be video recorded and possibly transcribed, depending on the needs for the data analysis phase of the project (see discussion below). In addition, interviewees will be asked to sign a release (Appendix 4), which will allow for the data to be used in other educational contexts.

Data Analysis

Because 'ethnographic research should have a characteristic ''funnel'' structure, being progressively focused over its course' (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 206) at this stage it is unclear how the interviews will be analysed, except that the focus will be on the influence of each of the four aspects of self on the students' experiences of writing. It is possible that responses will by typified and categorised as themes emerge across the interviews.

Student writing and institutional documents will be analysed separately, with the students' texts examined for indicators of self as author and discoursal self and documents provided by the instructors examined for indicators of the socio-cultural and institutional context in which the students are writing.

Critical Reflection on Research Design

The relatively small sample size may be construed as a limitation of the research design; however, the sample size is realistic and will allow for conclusions to be drawn about some students' experiences of writing in the context and recommendations for further research.

While my role as a 'knowledgeable insider' (Harris, 1992) may be perceived as problematic for conducting impartial ethnographic interviews, the interview seems to be the ideal way of understanding the situation from the inside. In addition, in drawing on Bakhtin, Lillis argues that 'dialogue is an ideological stance towards meaning making and self-hood' (2003: 198); simply using a questionnaire and documentary analysis might solve some of the more problematic issues around interviews, such as the time required to transcribe them, but that would mean ignoring the role of dialogue in eliciting information, particularly about people's perceptions of themselves and their writing.

In terms of the methodology of the study, Brewer outlines the 'four salient features of ethnography': it focuses on people's ordinary activities in naturally occurring settings, it uses unstructured and flexible methods of data collection, the researcher is actively involved with the people under study, and it explores the meanings which the activity has for the people themselves and the wider community (2000: 20). Table 1 outlines the ways in which the research meets these features of ethnography and the ways in which it might fall short.

Table 1: Ways in which the research meets the features of ethnography

Feature	Ways in which the research conforms to feature	Ways in which the research does not conform to feature
Focus on people in natural setting	• studies assignments written as part of the course	• uses interviews rather fieldwork or observation
Unstructured and flexible methods of data collection	• interviews only semi-structured, with room for digression • interested in any documents related to the communication about academic writing between students and lecturers	• interviews semi-structured • limited to only interviews and document analysis
Researcher actively involved with people under study	• I have existing professional relationship with some lecturers and students in the study	• I do not have existing professional relationship with others of the lecturers and students in the study
Explores meanings the activity has for the people and the wider community	• examines the implications of the role of academic writing in the academy	• limited to specific contexts (HE, teaching-led university, etc.)

Various aspects of the interview will need to be considered in light of the attributes of ethnographers as interviewers: trust, curiosity, and naturalness (Woods, 1986 cited in Cohen et al. 2007: 350). The following table (Table 2: Approaches to ensuring ethnographic attributes) illustrates how each attribute will be handled with staff and student participants.

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Table 2: Approaches to ensuring ethnographic attributes

	Trust	Curiosity	Naturalness
With students	The relationship transcends research because the students have a relationship with (me) as a Student Study Skills tutor. They have an existing educational relationship.	I have a genuine curiosity about students' experiences of academic writing in FE and HE contexts. I want to understand the experience from their point of view so that I can help them make transitions and achieve their full potential in the academy.	I will follow Lillis' lead and ask open-ended questions to move away from my role as talker to that of listener (2001: 9). I will not interrupt (except for clarification) and attempt to keep any bias out of the conversation. I will also attempt to make the interview feel like a conversation.
With staff	I have an existing relationship with the staff being interview and I would hope that our 'joint pursuit of a common mission' (Woods, 1986 in Cohen et al 2007: 350) is rooted in our desire to help students achieve.	My curiosity about staff experiences stems from the desire to understand the gaps between student and staff perceptions, which I think is key to understanding how to help all within the institution.	As above.

By using interviews, this critical ethnography aims to use the students' narrative voice – their stories of themselves – to understand how that shapes their experiences of writing in the context of academia, a context which often privileges a very different kind of voice. Along with other related projects, this enquiry aims to contribute to an honest analysis of the role of writing in the changing context of higher education.

Ethics

Finally, the research needs to be considered from an ethical standpoint. I am guided by the standards set by the University of Bath, Bath Spa University, and The British Educational Research Association (University of Bath 2007, Davies 2007 and BERA 2004). In addition, approval for the project has been given by the Head of the School of Development and Participation at Bath Spa University and requested from the Dean of the university's School of Education. All participants are adults and will be asked for their consent (in writing) to the interviews being recorded on video and for the results to be used in scholarly presentations (Appendix 4).

University of Bath and Bath Spa University research regulations and guidelines require research data to be handled lawfully under the Data Protection Act (University of Bath 2007 and Davies 2007), as such, I will obtain consent from my participants to collect and hold their data, collect only necessary and relevant data, ensure all data is accurate and hold the data securely and confidentially in a locked cabinet in a secure office.

Research Timetable

Appendix 3 outlines the action plan (in progress) for the research as conceived in November 2007. Original drafts of the research timetable called for a much quicker process; upon reflection about the realities of time constraints on both interviewers and interviewees (and my own inexperience designing and carrying out research projects), I decided that more time was needed to properly plan and conduct the research. The timetable includes time for collecting and analyzing the data, along with the writing of research of papers and dissemination at international conferences. See Appendix 5 for a copy of the research proposal accepted for the 2008 Canadian Association of Teachers of Technical Writing conference and Appendix 6 for a copy of the proposal submitted to the 2008 Writing Development in Higher Education conference.

Conclusions

The answer to the question 'how can I investigate the influence of identity on student writing at the transition from foundation to honours degree level?' is that I can use semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis to conduct a critical ethnographic study. Using Ivanič's four aspects of self (1998) as a guide, I can ask students about their autobiographical and discoursal selves, along with their conceptions of themselves as authors and their perceived possibilities for self-hood in the socio-cultural and institutional contexts in which they write to determine some of the issues students experience around academic writing in the current context of higher education.

The follow-up to this study will be an action-research project to understand how I can improve my practice to help students become more comfortable in the socio-cultural and institutional contexts in which they write. Because I want to improve my practice and action research 'asks a question of the kind ''How do I…'' (McNiff and Whitehead 2002: 85) and is a 'way of looking at your practice in order to check whether it is as you feel it should be' (McNiff and Whitehead 2002: 15), using this method will allow me to address any issues raised by the interviews and documentary analysis.

This research is important in the current context of higher education in the UK: with more funding recently announced for the widening participation initiative Aimhigher (Rammell, 2007) there will continue to be an influx of students into higher education who will have diverse identities not necessarily ideally suited to meet the existing expectations of the academy. This raises questions about the purpose and role of writing in higher education and, indeed the role of higher education in society. Understanding current approaches to educational research, including critical ethnography, enables me to investigate these questions in a professional, ethical and significant manner.

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Appendix 1: Student Interview Outline

Name of Participant:_____

Date of Interview:_____

Interview Location and Time:_____

I. Autobiographical Self
1. Can you please tell me a brief story about your life, how you got to this point?
2. Have you always thought of yourself as someone who would go to university?
    a. If no:
        i. Why didn't you think that you would go to university?
        ii. What changed your mind?
    b. If yes:
        i. Did you ever question that?
        ii. Did other people in your life see you as someone who would go to university?
3. How do you think your life history related to your attitude toward academic writing and your ability to meet the expectations on the FD?
4. How do you think your life story relates to your attitude toward academic writing and your ability to meet the expectations in your 3rd year of study?

II. Discoursal Self
5. Looking at a particular piece of writing, ask the student to talk about particular stylistic and linguist choice they've made, about how they were trying to sound to the reader.

III. Self as author
6. Do you see yourself as having authority to make claims about the topics you are studying? (refer to text for examples)

IV. Socio-cultural and institutional context and possible self-hoods
7. What do you think is the purpose of asking students to write assignments in university? For example, why do tutors set writing assignments rather than a multiple choice test?
8. Do you think the expectations are different in 3rd year than in the foundation degree?
    a. What do you think are the major differences in expectations?
    b. How are those expectations communicated to you?

9. Do you think there is certain way of writing that is privileged in university?
    a. If yes:
        i. What do you see as privileged ways of writing?
        ii. How comfortable do you feel writing in this way? Why?
        iii. Do you feel comfortable challenging the privileged ways of writing in the institution?

Appendix 2:Staff Interview Outline

Name of Participant:_____

Date of Interview:_____

Interview Location and Time:_____

Socio-cultural and institutional context

1. What do you think is the purpose of asking students to write assignments in university? For example, why do you set writing assignments rather than a multiple choice test?

2. Do you think the expectations of student writing are different in 3rd year than on the foundation degree?

    a. What do you think are the major differences in expectations?
    b. How are those expectations communicated to students?

3. Do you think there is a certain way of writing that is privileged in university?
    a. If yes:
        i. What do you see as the privileged way of writing?
        ii. How comfortable do you think students feel writing in this way? Why?
        iii. Do you feel comfortable challenging ideas about privileged ways of writing in the institution?

Appendix 3: Research Plan

Timeline	Goals	Actions	Notes and Contacts
By October 31	• Overview of educational research methods • Initial interview questions • get FE tutor on board for WDHE	• research educational research methods • choose and rationalize research methodology/methods for enquiry • draft of interview questions • approval from DH, other BSU contacts? • ensure ethical questions being addressed	• Viki Bennett re: Early Years tutors and students to contact (meeting Nov. 5) • BSU research policy – Ethics?? • meet with FE tutor
By November 30	• Identify possible participants • WDHE proposal submitted • Request documents from staff (expectations of writing) • Questions defined	• Set up interviews • Conduct interviews • Refine and submit proposal for WDHE • arrange recording equipment	• ask SG re: voice recorders • ask JW re: video recorder
By December 31	• Participants agreed • Interviews started • Learn about video research • Submit RME paper on Dec 4	• arrange times, dates and places • attend Video Research Methods seminar • email RME to Jack on Mon Dec 3	• AH interview on Dec 19
By January 31	• Interviews complete • ESC proposal submitted • Begin transcribing interviews		
By February 28	• Interviews transcribed?	• set aside plenty of time	
By March 31	• Results analysed • First draft of ESC paper	• devise typologies?	
By April 30	• First draft of WDHE paper • First draft of CATTW paper • Presentation of paper at ESC		
By May 31	• Papers and presentations prepared for all conferences		
June	• Presentation of paper at CATTW • Presentation of paper at WDHE		

Appendix 4: Copy of Release Form

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the research project <u>Understanding Student Writing at the Transition from Foundation to Honours Level</u>.

I will meet you on _____ in _____ at _____.

Please bring with you any materials related to writing on your course (copies of writing, copies of feedback, module handbooks, assignment instructions, etc.)

If you would like more information at any time or have any questions, please feel free to contact me.

Thank you again,

Joelle Adams, Student Achievement Coordinator
Student Study Skills Centre
School for Development and Participation
Bath Spa University
SP.7.G1
01225 876365

I, the undersigned, understand I am being interviewed for research purposes only and that my individual responses will have no bearing on my status as student/employee of Bath Spa University. I also understand that my views will be kept confidential from my peers and colleagues.

I consent to the interview being video-taped and for portions of the interview to be used in scholarly presentations at academic conferences.

I consent to being asked about my experiences of academic writing and understand that the information I give may be used in future to inform other research projects.

I am confident that my data will be held securely under the provision of the Data Protection Act (1998) and that the researcher has met guidelines for ethical research as set out by the University of Bath and Bath Spa University.

Name:_____

Signed:_____ Date:_____

Appendix 5: Conference Proposal Accepted for Presentation at 2008 Canadian Association of Teachers of Technical Writing Conference

Great Expectations: Staff and student perceptions of academic writing in a UK university

This research explores the similarities and differences in students' and instructors' expectations and perceptions of student writing at a teaching-led UK university. Much of the contemporary UK composition research argues for an 'academic literacies' approach to the teaching of writing (Lea and Street, Ivanič and Lea, Lillis, Haggis, Wingate, and others); this conceptual framework builds on traditional approaches to student writing, such as skill development and socialisation, but argues for a more thorough examination of the link between writing and epistemology within disciplines. Upon examination of students' and instructors' perceptions of the purpose, process, and value of academic writing assignments, this paper argues for the dismantling of borders between members of the scholarly community in order to improve students' 'academic literacy' and learning within their subject area; the paper also considers the implications of this UK-based research in other contexts, including Canadian universities.

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Appendix 6: Proposal submitted for consideration for presentation at 2008 Writing Development in Higher Education conference

This paper questions the role of identity in relation to student writing at a time and place of transition between a Foundation degree programme delivered in a further education institution and an Honours degree programme in a higher education institution. Drawing on results of a critical ethnography examining staff and students' perceptions about academic writing in these places and an action research project investigating how a study skills centre can improve practice to better help students negotiate these places of study and adapt to new educational contexts, this paper contributes to the growing body of work aimed at moving the academic literacies discussion from the theoretical to the practical.

The design and spirit of the ethnographic research draws on Ivanič's (1998) and Lillis' (2001) work on student writing and identity. Using semi-structured interviews and document analysis, the project investigates the influence of Ivanič's four aspects of writer identity - autobiographical, discoursal self, self as author, and possibilities for self-hood in the socio-cultural and institutional context (1998: 24-29) - as students transition between Foundation and Honours-level writing. The follow-up action research project reacts to Wingate's (2006) call for an end to a 'study skills' approach to teaching academic writing by investigating how academic literacies theory might be implemented in practice to help students negotiate this transition. The investigator asks 'how can I improve my practice to help students understand the change in expectations from Foundation to Honours-degree level?' In the process of researching and answering this question the researcher will generate a living theory of educational influence in the higher education of students. This will draw on Biesta's insight on the educational significance of understanding that education is 'not just about the transmission of knowledge, skills and values, but is concerned with the individuality, subjectivity, or personhood of the student, with their "coming into the world" as unique, singular beings' (2006: 27).

This paper offers recommendations of practical strategies for teachers of academic writing both in and outside of the disciplines helping students negotiate the changing times and places in which writing is taking place in higher education.

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