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Improving writing practices of students' academic literacy development

Abstract

Lecturers' teaching practices often leave indelible impressions on students' learning development. Students tend to respond to expectations that lecturers set, which might limit or extend the boundaries of learning. Given that not all students might access higher education with the requisite level of academic readiness to respond to the academic demands of first year studies, lecturers' academic literacy requirements and practices contribute to setting the tone for reading and writing in higher education. This article draws on lecturers' expectations of writing practices for the first-year subjects they teach to explore how academic literacy development for higher education might be supported or limited. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with lecturers to gain insight into writing skills and

practices required for their respective subjects. Written summative assessments were analysed to determine whether lecturers' perspectives of writing aligned with assessment expectations. This study provides support for the contention that lecturers' play a significant role in nurturing or limiting students' academic writing development. The findings suggest that academic writing practices that lecturers espouse have ramifications for how students access and articulate knowledge not only at first year level, but for vertical progression through the years of study.

Keywords: Academic literacy; academic writing; lecturer expectations; summative assessments

1. Introduction

The commonly understood purpose of higher education is for knowledge acquisition through teaching and learning. Morrow (2009: 116) asserts that the distinctiveness of knowledge in higher education is threefold: firstly, that higher education 'has to do with a *particular* kind of knowledge'; secondly that higher education is 'not continuous with education in general but marks out a kind of education which is qualitatively different from primary and secondary education', and thirdly, 'that higher education has to do with higher knowledge'. Morrow draws on Barnett's interpretation of 'higher knowledge' as follows:

An educational process can be termed higher education when the student is carried onto levels of reasoning which make possible critical reflection ... these levels of reasoning and reflection are 'higher', because they enable a student to take a view (from above, as it were) of what has been learned. Simply, 'higher education' resides in higher- order states of mind' (cited in Morrow, 2009: 118).

'Higher knowledge' it is claimed, is not readily accessible, but 'is typically attained through an extensive process of systematics and guided learning that pre-supposes and follows on the acquisition of other kinds of knowledge such as literacy' (Morrow, 2009: 116). There is a widely-held perception that literacy, academic literacy in particular, could promote or scupper access to higher knowledge within higher education (Boughey, 2000, 2013; McKenna, 2004; Hlalele, 2010; Bharuthram and McKenna, 2012; Cattell, 2013; Mgqwashu and Bengesai, 2014; Eybers, 2015). Academic literacy as an intermediary to knowledge in higher education is contingent on opportunities created for students to engage with text and other literacy modalities. In other words, the approach to academic literacy in the various subjects of study at university and lecturers' understanding of academic literacy to access meaning impact the teaching and learning context. This article explores lecturers' perceptions of academic writing requirements for their respective subjects taught at first-year level and provides insight into how their views and practices might nurture or limit students' academic writing development. Given the import of academic literacy in higher education (Lea and Street, 1998; Boughey, 2000; 2002; 2013; Bharuthram and McKenna, 2012) and given the differing academic literacy proficiency of first-year entering students as noted below, lecturers who teach at first-year level set the tone for expectations of literacy engagement for specific qualifications.

The impetus for academic writing as an academic literacy modality is that 'universities are ABOUT writing ... and it is central to constructing knowledge, educating students and negotiating a professional career (Hyland, 2011: 53). The centrality of writing in academia is evident in the plethora of written assessments such as written tests, research assignments and portfolios, amongst others. Furthermore, academic writing skills and practices extend beyond a qualification to further studies and/or professional environments. Entrenching sound writing practices is therefore paramount within a higher education context. [Refer Lillis and Turner, 2001; Wingate, 2006; Hyland, 2011; S. Bharuthram & S. McKenna, 2012; Hunter and Tse, 2013.]

Lecturers' requirements for academic writing in this article were viewed against the backdrop of the diverse profile of first-year university students and the concomitant need for appropriate academic literacy practices to support academic writing. The references to school background and school literacy reveal the different perspectives of literacy engagement which might not necessarily relate to higher education demands. Theories and approaches to academic literacy (Cummins, 1996; Lea and Street, 1998; Street, 2003; Gee 2015) were used to frame understandings of academic writing and underpin the discussion of data. The findings suggest that lecturers' expectations of writing for their subjects could engender thinking, reasoning, meaning-making and access to knowledge, or writing expectations could limit opportunities for exploring meaning-making and construction of knowledge. The data show that with many first-year students in need of academic literacy support (refer to the NBTP report, 2016), opportunities for students to engage with writing in the discipline should be provided, supported and nurtured by lecturers as experts in the field.

2. Academic readiness for higher education

According to National Benchmark Test (NBT) data students enter higher education with varying degrees of academic literacy proficiency (NBTP Report, 2016). The NBT results for the 2016 intake revealed that of the 81, 669 students who wrote the test in academic literacy, 24,576 (30.09%) were deemed to be proficient; 22,399 (27.43%) achieved a score within the upper intermediate benchmark band of 48%-63%; 23,437 (28.70%) achieved a lower intermediate score between 31% and 47%, and 11, 257 (13.78%) students were at the basic academic proficiency level having achieved a score of below 31% (NBTP Report 2016: 26). The NBT benchmark descriptions suggest that students who are deemed to be lower proficient and basic, should be placed on extended curriculum programmes. Although these statistics represent a student sample and are indicators of students' academic literacy proficiency at the particular time of writing, it is nevertheless telling that one-third of students entering higher education (i.e. students deemed to be proficient) might be able to cope with the academic demands of first year studies. Academic readiness for higher education could be attributed to a number of factors of which school background and school literacy are noted below.

Within the South African context, students enter higher education from different school and language backgrounds, for example, advantaged Model C schools and disadvantaged township schools. The reality of the diverse school profile is that not all students might have been afforded optimal learning opportunities at high school. Haggis (2006: 522) notes that 'the growing diversity of students means that the level and prior experience of learning at the point of entry into higher education can no longer be assumed'. This context foregrounds inequalities and differences in academic readiness for higher education that necessitates acknowledgement for academic support within the higher education sector. Against this background, lecturers' practices and expectations acquire significant import as role models for literacy engagement. Lecturers' expectations of academic literacy as

part of teaching and learning for their respective subjects present parameters for the kinds of responses that students will provide. For example, the academic demands of a research assignment with an essay as output presents a different academic challenge to a structured report with headings and information prompts. At first year-level it becomes all the more important for students to be inducted into the ways of understanding how linguistic features provide access to knowledge by reading, writing, thinking, reasoning and communicating using the discourse of the discipline. The first year of higher education provides the basis for academic engagement and sets expectations for subsequent years of study. Bharuthram & Mckenna (2012: 582) aver that

in order for ... students to acquire the practices required for HE success, the form and function of the latter need to be made explicit ... students need to be provided with a map of their discipline's norms. Such mapping out proves difficult for lecturers who may be either unaware of the existence of such norms and conventions or see them as "common sense".

Failure for students to be schooled within a disciplinary and academic literacies framework could translate into missed opportunities to provide them with the requisite language knowledge and skills to access and broaden knowledge vistas as a means of academic empowerment.

3. Language proficiency: high school and higher education

Research suggests that school literacy might not necessarily prepare students for the academic writing demands of higher education. This gap between secondary and tertiary studies could be attributed to several factors: (1) school literacy focuses on literary genres, expository/narrative essays, recall and comprehension; (2) the low language admission requirement (i.e. a minimum of 30%) for diploma qualifications and (3) poor schooling opportunities and lack of resources in disadvantaged communities. Hlalele (2010: 99) claims that 'it has generally been accepted that schools fail, to a certain extent, to prepare learners for the rigours of higher education', while Eybers (2015: 80-81) asserts that 'academic literacy practices found in disciplinary departments, are undertaken at a level which is much more complex and entails a deeper level of criticality, compared to students' previous literacy experiences'. By implication, compared with high school, higher education represents academic terrain not encountered before. This notion is borne out by Lea and Street's (1998: 158) assertion that 'learning in higher education involves adapting to new ways of knowing: new ways of understanding, interpreting and organising knowledge'.

Adapting to new ways of knowing at university is evidenced by a review of Papers 1, 2 and 3 and their memoranda, of the National Senior Certificate (NSC) First Additional Language (FAL) for November 2015. These samples were selected on the basis that most students entering higher education are not English first language speakers, and

that English is the dominant medium of instruction at higher education institutions in South Africa. At NSC level the text genres were novels, dramas, short stories and poetry, requiring comprehension of content. The comprehension in Paper 1 focused mainly on recall of textual information with writing limited to a point-form summary. Writing tasks for Paper 3 included exploratory, narrative, descriptive and reflective essays, with choices of writing a letter to the press, an obituary, a report on shoplifting or a dialogue. While these skills and practices for reading and writing are no doubt important, the genres, question types and approach to language use and academic writing do not align with the disciplinary demands of academia for higher education. The question papers suggest that the use of English for FAL at high school serves very different purposes when compared with the use of English for academic purposes at university. As such, the transition between high school and university needs to be mediated to induct students into the ways of thinking, knowing and being of higher education (Bharuthram and Mckenna, 2012). Bharuthram and Mckenna (2012: 587) posit that 'there is a need to make reading and writing literacy practices in the different disciplines explicit for students, who are not likely to experience a smooth transition into powerful disciplinary norms'. This renders academic writing practices of lecturers crucial to how students apply and develop their own practices in the course of study.

4.3 Conceptual Framework

This article draws on conceptions of academic literacy as defined by Cummins (1996), Lea and Street (1998), Street (2003) and Gee (2015) and locates the writing practices of each subject within these theories and approaches. Academic literacy has been defined in many ways by different theorists in the field ranging from narrow conceptions limited to writing for academic purposes to broad conceptions such as Gee's (2015) Discourse with a capital 'D', Cummins's (1996) Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), Street's (2003) autonomous and ideological perspectives, and Lea and Street's (1998) models and pluralistic notion of academic literacies. According to Gee (2015: 178-179) Discourse exemplifies 'distinctive ways of acting, interacting, valuing, feeling, dressing, thinking, believing with other people and with various objects, tools and technologies'. Meaning from textual or other modalities is derived from the context in which the literacy act occurs, such as social contexts or learning within a vocational higher education context. Cummins' (1996: 21-34) differentiates between Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS), the ability to use language in context-embedded situations where visible cues contribute to meaning-making and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). CALP relates to language being used in more cognitively demanding context-reduced situations such as academic writing, which is the subject of this article, where thought processes and writing development rely on abstract linguistic elements.

Lea and Street's (1998) three models of academic literacy practices, i.e. the study skills model, the academic socialisation model and the academic literacies model provide a lens to explore how academic writing is applied in subjects of study. The three models are not mutually exclusive; rather, each approach is subsumed in the other. The study

skills approach relates to literacy as a set of skills such as knowing the rules of syntax, grammar, punctuation and spelling. The academic socialisation model relates to reading and writing in the discipline, embedded in institutional, disciplinary and vocational contexts. The academic socialisation model suggests a more context-dependent approach to academic literacy than the study skills model which presents literacy as 'a set of atomised skills' that 'emphasises surface features, grammar and spelling' (Lea and Street, 1998: 158-159). The academic literacies model, 'sees literacies as social practices [and] ... views student writing and learning as issues at the level of epistemology and identities rather than skill or socialisation' (Lea and Street, 1998: 159). The academic literacies model proposes a process of literacies development in social contexts into which the study skills model and the academic socialisation model are subsumed.

According to Street (2003: 77) literacy is not autonomous, 'not simply a technical and neutral skill' that once acquired is transferable to other contexts. Literacy in higher education 'is not so much on the acquisition of skills ... but rather on what it means to think of literacy as social practice' (Street, 2003: 77). Literacy as ideological model is:

always embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles. It is about knowledge: the ways in which people address reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity and being. It is always embedded in social practices, such as ... a particular educational context' (Street, 2003: 77-78).

Drawing on sociolinguistics and anthropology, literacies are social activities, 'something people do when they interact with one another', while 'practices' relate to language activities bound up with activities in the real world that provide ways of linking language and context (Hyland, 2011: 59). Literacy skills, for example writing skills, are inextricably embedded with literacy practices, such as using reading and writing skills to compose an essay (Hyland, 2011). Furthermore, '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' (Lea and Street, 1998: 158). This study shows that lecturers' tend to adopt a more study skills approach and academic socialisation approach to academic writing by virtue of the vocational bias of qualifications. Although writing is contextual and disciplinary-based for each subject, Street's (2003: 77) ideological ideal of writing practices being 'embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles' seems not to be incorporated in all lecturers' understandings of writing for their respective subjects.

5. Methodology

This article focuses on writing practices as described by subject lecturers of two first-year subjects from two qualifications at a university of technology. Anonymity of the

subjects and subject lecturers was agreed to as part of the research protocol. As such, the subjects for the degree qualification in humanities will be referred to as Subject A and Subject B, and the subjects for the diploma qualification in health and wellness sciences are Subject C and D. The purposive selection of subjects in a degree and diploma qualification would provide insights into whether parallels might be drawn between lecturer expectations for academic writing in different fields of study and different qualification types given that academic writing is discipline specific and not homogenous across all qualifications. Subject lecturers were interviewed to present their perspectives of academic literacy as it pertained to writing for their respective subjects. During the interview each lecturer expounded on the kinds of writing requirements for each of their subjects. Each interview was recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions were sent to the interviewees for verification regarding accuracy of information and to confirm data use for research purposes. Interview data were augmented with document analysis of summative assessments for each subject to allow for more than one perspective of subject writing and to determine actual practices required. Writing requirements for summative assessments were summarized to show alignment between interview data and assessments. Given the constructive alignment approach that informs teaching, learning and assessment at this university, by implication, assessments should mirror actual teaching and learning practices. The data were analysed by means of content analysis to identify and define the kinds of writing skills, practices and expectations that lecturers advocated in the course of teaching and learning. It should be noted that the discussion and findings of this sample are limited to the lecturers and subjects in this article and are not generalizable to other subjects in the same or similar qualifications.

6. Data analysis and discussion

The data and discussion are presented according to writing practices per subject. The extracts selected for discussion below are verbatim transcribed interview data. In-text quotations to explain or expound on a point of discussion were taken from the extracts and appear between inverted commas. All extracts and in-text quotations are transcribed interviewee statements.

6.1 Humanities: Subject A

This subject was predominantly text-oriented and required intensive reading and writing as part of knowledge acquisition. The lecturer explained academic writing as formal writing and alluded to textual analysis, synthesis and developing an own voice in argumentation. Academic writing for Subject A was explained by the lecturer as follows:

We do try to insist on them writing formally because it's academic work and they have to learn to write like academics. When they try to use informal language, slangy phrases, I try to correct that and show them how they should be writing. Academic writing [is about] how you do an introduction, how you develop an

argument, how you use analytical terms, how you synthesise ideas in presenting an argument ... how you take a position in an academic argument ... [in an] academic paper you are using ideas that you are reading from, and imposing your own voice on that ... you make your own argument and present your own opinions.

This extract suggests that academic writing was explicated in terms of applying discourse structure to develop an argument, starting with 'how you do an introduction ... synthesise ideas and take a position in an academic argument'. The references to argumentation, analysis and synthesis suggest that writing was more than a skills-based approach focusing on grammar and syntax, and included academic socialization of writing 'like academics', i.e. inducting students into the culture of the academy (Lea and Street, 1998: 159). The extract implies that writing practices for this subject might be different from that which students might have acquired previously since students had to 'learn to write like academics' and had to be shown 'how they should be writing'. These quotations suggest that students would need to be socialised to think and write like academics. The emphasis on formal writing implied a particular genre of writing with which students as aspirant academics had to conform. The lecturer's explanation of writing in the extract alluded to reasoning, textual composition, synthesis and argumentation and incorporating an own opinion, situated within the subject context. For example, 'how you take a position in an academic argument' as the lecturer noted, would require an ability to analyse text, extract main ideas, assimilate ideas with own perspectives and synthesise these ideas into a plausible argument. The ability 'to write like academics ... use analytical terms ... synthesise and take a position in an academic argument' suggest that for Subject A academic writing was more than elementary language use such as study skills engagement. The respondent portrayed academic writing as cognitively demanding, within a subject-specific, context-reduced academic (Cummins, 1996) writing context. Similarly, the extract alluded to Discourse-oriented (Gee, 2015) interaction acknowledging the need to think, reason and articulate in academic parlance using academic register.

The lecturer provided students with questions for interactive reading such as:

- From what position in society is the author writing?
- Who is the intended audience for this writing?
- Is the language usage alarmist, persuasive, controversial?
- What is the central argument being presented?
- Are there sweeping conflicting or contradictory statements?

These reading prompts were pre-cursor exercises to summary writing. This approach resembled the academic literacies model and required more than engaging with surface

features of language such as spelling and punctuation. The interviewee considered summaries to be a means of demonstrating understanding of text. However, summary writing included more than paraphrasing the textual content. The lecturer required of students to show understanding of textual content by providing an own interpretation and perspective, as noted below:

I require them to summarise an article so that I know they have a basic understanding of what it is all about. I ask them to give their opinions on these educational articles ... summarise ... interpret and ... [provide] their own perspective.

The references to 'own perspective' in the excerpt above, requires dialoguing with the author by contributing own thoughts and ideas. Foregrounding the voice of the student in relation to the author calls for higher order levels of cognition where student writing is 'being concerned with the processes of meaning-making and contestation around meaning' (Lea and Street, 1998: 159). The lecturer's approach to textual engagement and academic writing suggests that academic literacy was viewed as a vehicle to interpretation and deriving meaning. The reading schema for textual analysis and the explanation of academic writing would require of students to engage with subject content in an in-depth way. The act of summary writing is itself a discursive tool that signals textual engagement and interpretation.

The lecturer reported that in essay-format students were required to:

... compare two different theories. I require them to do more than summarising ... to use their own voice ... their own identity ... synthesise information from different readings, put it together and take a position ... more analysis and synthesis.

This quotation reflects a more cognitively demanding comparative analysis of readings for writing preparation that incorporates an academic literacies approach 'at the level of epistemology and identity rather than skill or socialization' (Lea and Street, 1998:159). Although analysis, synthesis and providing an own opinion are reiterated in excerpts, this does not imply that academic literacy skills are autonomous, i.e. transferable from one context to another. Texts are written in specific genres for specific purposes with textual analysis and synthesis specific to each text and written task. A comparative analysis as described by the lecturer would require intensive reading of texts, an understanding of each theory to extrapolate similarities and/or differences, then synthesise a response incorporating an own opinion. This suggests steering students towards higher knowledge and 'levels of reasoning which make possible critical reflection' (Morrow, 2009: 118) as noted earlier in this article. The reiteration in the excerpts of 'more analysis and synthesis' and taking a position suggests that this was common practice for academic writing for Subject A.

Three writing-intensive summative assessments were analysed for Subject A: (1) a portfolio of ten reading articles with summaries as writing tasks; (2) a research assignment, and (3) the year-end written test. The other assessments for this subject were practical projects that did not fit the academic writing profile for analysis. Each assessment required intensive reading skills to access information and provide own perspectives. For example, the portfolio required of students to summarise ten subject-specific reading texts and in a separate paragraph, present their own opinion on the content of each article. The reading prompts provided by the lecturer were intended to guide thinking and reasoning, and develop an understanding for summary writing and essays as the core writing outputs for assessments. The writing requirements and practices for assessments mirrored the lecturer's interpretation of writing as described during the interview. For example, each assessment was writing intensive (essays, research assignments), and included summarising, synthesising information and providing an own perspective as noted in the interview. Based on the data and discussion above, this subject was writing intensive and required of students to engage with text at the level reminiscent of Cummins's (1996) notion of CALP, the academic literacies approach (Lea and Street, 1998), Street's ideological model (2003), and Gee's (2015) Discourse.

6. Humanities: Subject B

This subject was more practically-oriented and was offered alongside Subject A in the same qualification. With reference to writing for Subject B, the lecturer indicated that:

Syntax is not a focus area. I do think that it is important but I cannot pay too much attention. I would address it when ... I cannot make meaning or understand what it is that they're trying to say ... it's the grammar ... the sentence structure ... I realise it's important. Language is not a big thing for me ... it's more the facts ... it always bothers me that I can't spend as much time on language ... grammar ... structure of paragraphs ... it's needed for my subject.

The extract suggests that the message seemed more important than the medium, as long as the intended message was comprehensible to the lecturer. The lecturer expected of students to focus on language skills such as structure, syntax and grammar, but noted in the interview that this was the domain of the Communication lecturer. The interviewee viewed writing as a vehicle for content delivery, ensuring conceptual understanding and displaying facts. Language and literacy development were peripheral to subject content with the focus being on key-words related to facts rather than appropriate language use as the vehicle to convey facts correctly. According to the lecturer, syntax was important but the information conveyed was more important than correct language use. The lecturer claimed that syntax and grammar (i.e. study-skills focus) impacts meaning and that incomprehensible language use was penalised as noted in following quotation from interview data:

'if they do write in a way that I cannot comprehend what they're trying to say, then of course, they will be penalised'.

This comment presents a contradiction in terms where students were penalised but not taught about language conventions to improve writing skills and practices. The data suggest that academic literacy was limited to using language to convey content, irrespective of correct language use, rather than providing students with tools for discourse analysis and synthesis of subject content. The lecturer's expectations, according to the data, leaned more towards the study skills approach (Lea and Street, 1989) with basic language requirements to portray subject knowledge. Language was viewed as an instrument of communication (Boughey, 2013) rather than a vehicle for analysis, meaning-making and introduction to disciplinary language development. This approach could be attributed to the lecturer's predilection for entrenching concepts and content knowledge.

Essay planning and structure were largely formatted by the lecturer as noted below:

... it's very factual ... It's a structured essay ... the structure is given ... it should be in that structure ... more descriptive writing.

Students were not required to plan an essay, to write paragraphs or develop coherence and cohesion. Headings and sub-headings were specified and students filled in details according to descriptions provided. No research assignment was required. The structured essay implied conformance and compliance as required by the lecturer. Summary writing, according to the lecturer was:

... quite big from the second year onwards. At first year level I will provide them with prepared notes ... that I have prepared myself. It's a very sort of, nurtured approach ... and really just building their confidence in their first-year reading skills ... and their writing skills.

The lecturer provided students with prepared notes which diminished opportunities for academic literacy practices regarding disciplinary reading and writing. Writing tasks for Subject B were structured and minimal. The data revealed that besides structured essays, written tasks were non-existent. Paragraphs and summaries were left to the second year of study. Factual, descriptive essays were contrived, controlled and planned by the lecturer with limited opportunities for individual writing development. As noted in the extract, the 'nurtured approach' with limited expectations for academic writing suggests that the lecturer is of the opinion that student-assisted strategies support student learning. It is ironic that in adopting a nurtured approach, students are being deprived of academic writing development opportunities. Furthermore, how will students be prepared for the second year of study with incremental academic writing demands?

The lecturer considered formal writing to be that which:

is required in academic writing ... how to use abbreviations, referencing, tenses and so on. That is more or less the formal writing for me.

Academic writing was described in terms of referencing and sentence structure, typical of the study skills approach (Lea and Street, 1998). No mention was made of discourse development and how writing contributes to reasoning, developing thoughts and ideas, and so doing encourages meaning-making and developing a stance on subject content.

Summative assessments for Subject B included labelling diagrams and questions such as: (1) 'list two differences between ...'; and (2) 'what phenomenon is illustrated in ...?' The final assessment had a reading article with contextual questions. The data revealed that assessments presented limited writing opportunities to explain or substantiate a point. The assessments reflected the lecturer's limited expectations of writing requirements as described in the interview. It might be argued that the lecturer's notion of nurturing presented a deficit model of teaching and learning, i.e. focusing on what students might not be able to do, rather than mediating transitions between school and university by developing students' existing schemas of literacies. The lecturer's approach to academic writing was highly structured and served to limit rather than extend students' engagement with language for both reading and writing. This approach resembled a technicist focus of knowledge acquisition with minimal reasoning and higher order thinking required to access knowledge and articulate understanding. So doing, this limits opportunities for students to engage with the discourse of the discipline, i.e. to use language in 'thinking, feeling, believing, valuing and acting ... as a member of a socially meaningful group' (Gee, 2015: 179), which have implications for how academic literacy is meant to support the agenda for knowledge acquisition in this qualification and the profession.

6.3 Health Sciences: Subject C and Subject D

Subjects C and D were first-year subjects of a diploma qualification located in the health sciences. The subjects were both textual and practice-oriented, with certain tasks and assessments being more practical and less writing-intensive. Research assignments were minimal and term tests required limited responses for writing development. Subject C had more independent writing tasks than Subject D, where students had more guidance from the lecturer such as structured templates with detailed information prompts.

The lecturer for Subject C placed emphasis on discourse structure and coherence as central to academic writing. She explained that for writing, students should know how words as units of meaning contribute to discourse and how the arrangement of sentences portray meanings in paragraphs. According to the lecturer, students:

... won't be able to make meaning if they don't know the structure of the words, whether it's structure of words or sentence structure in a paragraph ... I see academic writing ... [as] the ability to arrange my words in a cohesive sentence, making up a cohesive paragraph.

The extract alluded to writing as a skills-based arrangement of words and coherent discourse development. The ability to write 'cohesive sentences, making up a cohesive paragraph' could be interpreted as applying several layers of synthesis which could include, but are not limited to:

- using correct syntax, grammar and genre for sentence composition;
- linking ideas in logical order, and
- arranging the position of the topic sentence in relation to the supporting ideas.

Textual coherence, according to the lecturer related to the normative aspects of essay structure including:

... the introduction, how they introduce the topic, the body with sub-headings and the sub-headings relating back to task that was given, then some examples to show their understandings, whether it's as appendices or diagrams, and also the conclusion ... So it's that whole flow of information.

The relational elements of text, i.e. using appropriate introductory and concluding sentences to link paragraphs as noted in the excerpt provided insight into the importance of coherence for academic writing. Writing for Subject C was a means of showing understanding and demonstrating knowledge acquisition through developing coherent written outputs using the appropriate structure outlined by the lecturer. Discourse development for writing tasks, i.e. the structure and flow of information ranging from sentences to paragraphs and essays, typified the lecturer's perception of academic writing. This suggests a skills-based approach to writing (Lea and Street, 1998) given the minimal commentary by the lecturer on how writing in academia is more than a form of communicating and demonstrating information. The necessity of entrenching subject content was noted by the lecturer as follows:

I just want to know that they know the topic ... I think of them as first-year students where I need to give them the information, lay the foundation ... and not expecting them to come in and be able to argue a point.

The lecturer's perception of academic writing focused on demonstrating knowledge without due recognition to writing 'as a process for discovering meaning ... and a resource for constructing thoughts (Bouhey, 2002: 300). Students' ability to think critically and reason beyond providing content information remained untapped. Presenting an own idea or developing an argument as part of engaging with subject content and constructing knowledge were not alluded to by the interviewee. Writing was explained as a skill for demonstrating content acquisition.

Assessment writing for Subject C included term tests and an assignment. Test responses from students included short descriptions, explanations and definitions requiring minimal writing and discourse development. Responses to test questions were mainly in phrase or sentence format. The assignment conformed with writing conventions as for an academic research assignment. Comparisons drawn between the interview data and assessments included the importance of terminology (words) in context, the ability to construct sentences and paragraphs, establishing coherence and applying the conventional essay structure of introduction, body and conclusion. Although the lecturer emphasised the importance of structure and coherence in writing tasks, there was no presence of this in term assessments.

The fixation with discourse structure in relation to academic writing resembled the study skills approach, although elements of academic socialisation would be evident by virtue of writing to show understanding of vocational content. The cognitive level of writing tasks did not seem require of students to consider writing as more than a communication tool to articulate information. The academic literacies approach (Lea and Street, 1998) was not alluded to in the interview and assessment data. Academic writing as a vehicle to reason, to develop understanding and an own interpretation as integral to pedagogy was not part of the lecturer's discourse and assessments and did not find traction in practice.

6.4 Health Sciences: Subject D

The lecturer for Subject D viewed the objective of academic writing as the ability to:

... understand, analyse, be able to communicate ... to communicate the language of your profession ... also then to write it out. So, to understand it, analyse it then give it back to me.

This extract suggests that writing was a means of demonstrating learning and was simultaneously a means to an end within a cycle of teach, learn and demonstrate what was learnt. The lecturer noted that academic writing represented a formal style with no slang, using a particular genre such as writing in the third person. Students were not encouraged to express individual understandings given that:

the paragraphs that they do write in my tests are straight from the books. So they can't even put it in their own words.

The comment 'straight from the books' suggests that students were encouraged to rewrite information without any analysis and interpretation required. The need for verbatim responses as suggested in the excerpt above resonates with the notion of learning being a means to an end, i.e. to ensure that students acquire propositional knowledge without necessarily thinking critically or making meaning within an academic

context. Such a view as the lecturer holds, according to the excerpt, renders academic literacy 'benign and neutral' (Henderson and Hirst, 2007: 26) with little or no contribution to academic and professional student development. Academic writing as sets of practice define academic disciplines and 'as students participate in these disciplines, they learn specific ways of making meaning' (Henderson and Hirst, 2007: 26). Limited engagement with 'concepts, knowledges... genres, rhetorical structures, argument formulations' (Henderson and Hirst, 2007: 26) that constitute an academic discipline might scupper student progress.

In terms of paragraph writing, the lecturer expected of students to focus on:

... one idea per sentence ... the next paragraph ... must be linked to the paragraph before that. In the instructions, I actually tell them what to do. I give them the headings. I say that's your introduction, that is your first paragraph ... discuss the age and the sex and family history ... So it's a case report and everything is given to them.

As noted in the excerpt, the headings and instructions in the template-style report actually tell students what to do. These headings and instructions might serve to limit writing development regarding interpretation of content as the information in each section of the report was prescribed by the lecturer. A template-report with prescribed guidelines, headings, sub-headings and detailed content prompts under each heading was the main writing output for Subject D. This highly structured approach with headings and content prompts under each heading did not allow for creativity of thought, analysis of content, synthesis and discourse development, and did not support academic writing development which is a necessity for first year students. Writing requires thought processes to construct ideas, is a process of discovering meaning and identity (for example, as a student in a particular profession) and requires specific levels of language and literacy competence to articulate ideas. (Refer to Boughey, 2002; Henderson and Hirst, 2007). Academic writing should not be limited to demonstrating knowledge but to acquire knowledge and develop an identity within a disciplinary knowledge base. Writing development falls within the ambit of universities as 'training grounds for higher education and academia ...[to]... provide opportunities for students to engage with the particular academic literacy practices of specific disciplines' (Henderson and Hirst, 2007: 27).

Teaching and learning tended to focus on the study skills approach and academic socialisation approach (Lea and Street, 1998) where students were immersed in the discourse of the discipline for knowledge sake. Students were not provided with the wherewithal as to how academic writing might provide access to knowledge and encourage cognition by elevating academic demands. Academic writing for this subject equated with entrenching understanding of subject content based on the lecturer's interpretation of what and how students should learn, resonant with subjectivist pedagogy that limits student agency in academic development. In other words, students were not encouraged to think outside of the lecturer's expectations to develop disciplinary

knowledge independently of what was prescribed. Students' own sense of agency to be independent thinkers and develop literacy skills and practices to engage with knowledge was minimised.

Term tests as summative assessments for Subject D had the same format. Student responses were limited to one-word answers, diagram labels, simple sentences for definitions, substantiation for TRUE or FALSE answers and brief paragraphs. The report assignment was template-driven with each section (i.e. headings, sub-headings and content prompts) clearly defined by the lecturer. The analysis of assessments revealed that at no stage were students required to independently plan paragraphs and essays. Report writing was about following specific instructions without the necessity to critique information, present an own opinion or articulate and develop responses independently. All information included in the report had to conform with instructions and headings provided. The latter section of the report required reasoning and writing skills to summarise the findings and report on appropriate conclusions of the findings according to the writing conventions of the profession. Although writing progressed from sentence to paragraph format, and reasoning developed from supplying facts to drawing conclusions, the lecturer adopted a nurtured, guided approach of 'actually [telling] them what to do' as noted above. Written outputs were either 'straight from the books' (refer to the quotation above) and/or choreographed by the lecturer as to the kinds of information to appear under specific headings.

7. Conclusion

The nature of subject content, i.e. text based or predominantly practical and multimodal, as well as literacy conventions of the profession impact on teaching and learning in vocational education contexts. To this end, 'the teaching methods of lecturers and academics are not random acts but are underpinned by philosophical leanings which influence these very methods and their accompanying approaches of assessment' (Eybers, 2015: 82). Given the centrality of academic literacy that 'comprises the norms and values of higher education as manifested in discipline specific practices' (McKenna, 2004: 269), lecturers' practices and expectations, in this case academic writing, set the parameters in which students learn. This suggests a hegemonic bias where lecturers have the power to nurture learning by using academic reading and writing to extend the boundaries of knowledge or limit cognition with lowered expectations. Bharuthram and McKenna (2012: 583) note that 'academic literacy, the practices whereby we construct knowledge, is related to the power and ideological relationships at play within each classroom context'. First year students, with their limited knowledge and understanding of higher education content and contexts might not challenge writing practices and expectations and accept what lecturers do and expect from students in their respective subjects as the norm. In a context where learners enter university from different high school learning environments with different literacy norms, the responsibility for setting expectations at the appropriate level of learning becomes all the more pronounced. The issue at stake is that if students are not socialised into the ways of knowing, reasoning,

valuing and being at first-year level, with academic writing in particular as currency to access higher knowledge, it might have implications for academic performance across the years of study. This article focused on subjects in a degree and a diploma qualification which revealed that writing requirements were similar, except for Subject A which tended towards a more cognitively demanding approach. Academic literacy as social construct in higher education relates to students being immersed into literacy practices of academia and the vocation irrespective of qualification type. The pivotal role of language and writing in students' academic development should be acknowledged and lecturers should preferably set expectations that extend the boundaries of learning. The ideal would be for all lecturers who teach first-year subjects in a qualification to embrace similar writing practices that promote higher order thinking and contribute to developing an identity in academia and the vocation/profession. Subject A and Subject B, for example, are taught to the same students in the same qualification, yet writing expectations are markedly different. These differences in writing approaches could lead students to align certain writing expectations with certain subjects. Academic writing should challenge all students in all subjects to think and reason according to disciplinary conventions and academic demands. Adopting deficit views of students' ability based on language or educational background and incorporating assisted learning strategies such as structured templates with information prompts or minimal writing tasks, do not augur well for academic writing development. Tinto (2008) cautions that:

quite simply, no student rises to low expectations. Regrettably, it is too often the case that universities expect too little of students, especially during the critical first year of college.

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