CHAPTER 4

STUDENT-WRITING TUTORS: MAKING SENSE OF "ACADEMIC LITERACIES"

Joelle Adams

This chapter draws on a small-scale study of the student-tutor experience to illustrate how student-tutors make sense of the "academic literacies" framework, as set out by Mary Lea and Brian Street (1998). By "student-tutors" I am referring to students who engage in supporting other students' writing as part of their work on an accredited undergraduate module. The module is *Teaching Writing*, which offers third-year Creative Writing students an opportunity to develop their pedagogical knowledge and skills. Participants engage in a wide range of practices as student-tutors, including one-to-one peer tutoring in the university's Writing and Learning Center, designing and leading subject-specific academic writing and editing workshops within the university, and facilitating creative writing workshops in the community (see also Good Chapter 3, this volume).

In recognition of the challenges students often face in making sense of theory, I carried out a small scale intervention study which involved devising a series of activities to help student-tutors understand the key tenets of academic literacies theory and apply the principles in their tutoring practice. I asked students to create a diagram of based on Lea and Street's (1998) introductory article, to help them identify the key concepts, to apply the principles to practice through observation and in their own tutoring, and to record their reflections in their learning journals. These activities acknowledge the professional context of the module and some of the "signature pedagogies" (Lee Shulman, 2005) in education: that is, observation, application, and reflection.

Data extracts included in this chapter are drawn from diagrams and journal entries by student-tutors who studied the module in the academic years 2010/11 and 2011/12; permission has been given by student-tutors for their work to be used, but all names have been changed. In my attempt to make sense of their learning experience, I draw on Roz Ivanič's (1998) work to consider how "aspects of identity" and "possibilities for self-hood in the socio-cultural and institutional contexts" (Ivanič, 1998, p. 27) figure in the student-tutors' experiences.

STUDENTS' CONCEPTIONS AND OBSERVATIONS OF ACADEMIC LITERACIES

Students read "Student Writing in Higher Education: an academic literacies approach" (Lea & Street, 1998) prior to one of the initial module workshops. In the session, students created diagrams to help them clarify the relationship between the three approaches to writing in higher education outlined by Lea and Street—study skills, academic socialization and academic literacies. Students then shared diagrams with the whole class and reflected on the exercise in their journals.

First, in Figure 4.1, Sally's representation clearly signals a hierarchical relationship between different elements. She positions being "academically literate" as being built on the foundation of study skills and academic socialization, but is informed by one's "previous experiences, etc." or what might be considered the "autobiographical self" aspect of identity (Ivanič, 1998, p. 24). These "previous experiences, etc." form the basis for students' academic experiences. The placement of the "really good graduate" at the pinnacle of the pyramid shows that Sally interprets the model as privileging being "academically literate" as part of achieving success; it would seem that Sally is interpreting Lea and Street's model referentially and normatively (as describing a particular level of literacy knowledge) and as applying to the whole student experience (and beyond).
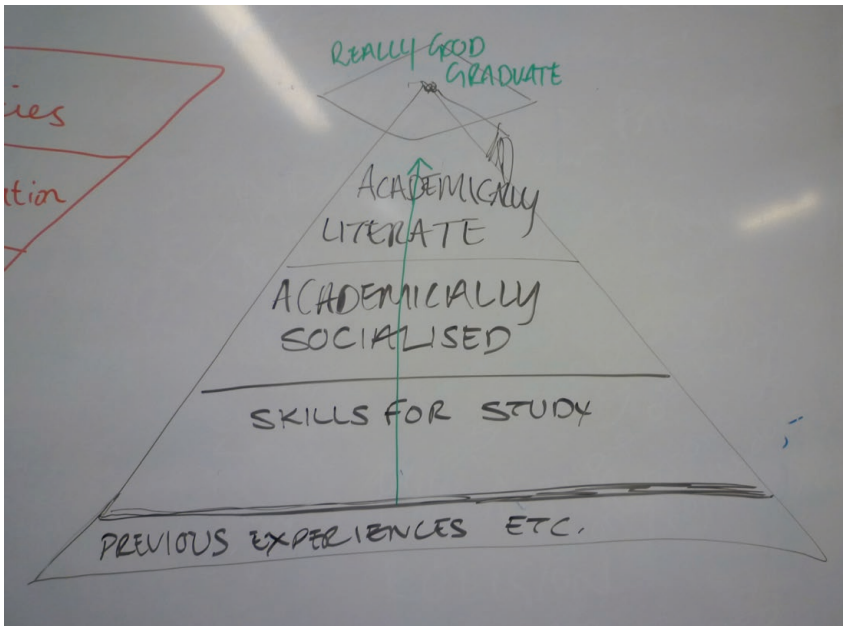

Figure 4.1: Sally's conception of academic literacies from reading Lea and Street (1998).

In her journal, Alex uses a bull's-eye (see Figure 4.2) and, like Sally, a layered pyramid to demonstrate a sense of "construction"; however, Alex inverts the pyramid, with study skills at the narrow base and academic literacies situated at the wide top, demonstrating her conception of academic literacies as 'broader', all-encompassing approach, than the study skills or academic socialization approaches to teaching writing.

During the work around academic literacies on the module, students often claim that an academic literacies approach subsumes other approaches, an argument made by Lea and Street (1998); Alex's "bull's-eye" diagram is indicative of how students think of an academic literacies approach as encompassing both study skills and academic socialization. The idea that academic literacies subsumes other approaches is evident in the way both Sally and Alex place academic literacies theory at the "top" of pyramids; study skills and academic socialization are phases or goals one passes through on the way to the summit.

What is unclear is whether students like Sally and Alex see academic literacies as a theory—they seem to be using it as a description of a hierarchy of literacy expertise. Though the students are learning how to become writing teachers and tutors, their conceptions of the model seem to be understood through their experience as individual students and with concerns, as with Sally's note, about becoming a "really good graduate." The "student" part of their identity may be influencing their engagement with the academic literacies framework: they may not yet identify themselves as being in a position to step outside their current experience and concerns to
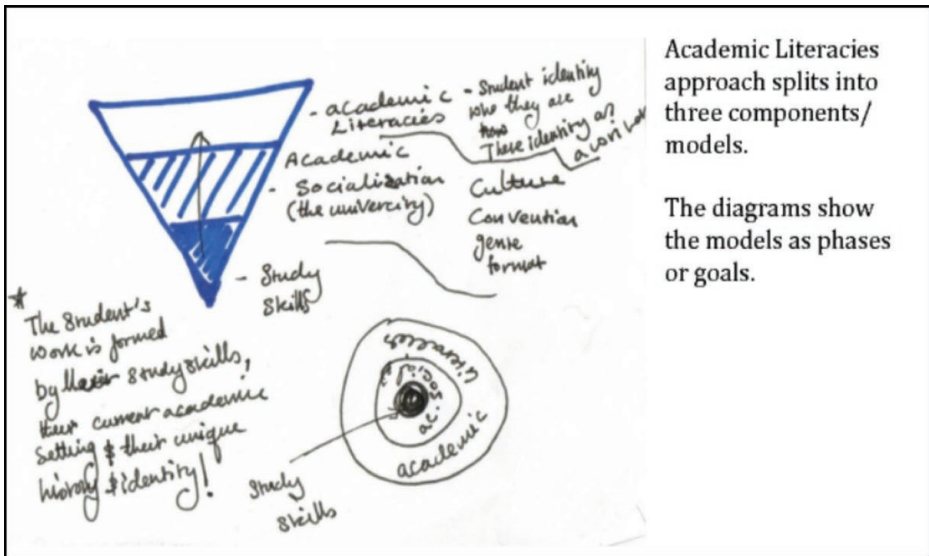

Figure 4.2: Alex's conception of academic literacies from reading Lea and Street (1998).

work with theories of language and literacy in their own teaching practice.

WHAT WE SEE AND DO: HOW STUDENTS RELATE ACADEMIC LITERACIES PRINCIPLES TO PRACTICE

After the diagram activity, students commented in their learning journals: their comments illustrate the different ways in which they grappled with Lea and Street's framework and tried to connect it to their understanding of teaching and learning writing, as well as to their own experience and perspectives as writers. Extract 1 for example illustrates how Anne distinguishes between academic socialization and academic literacies:

EXTRACT 1: ANNE'S CONCEPTION OF ACADEMIC LITERACIES AFTER READING LEA AND STREET (1998)

> Academic socialization sees the tutor as a gateway between the student as a learner and the student as a professional. It address [sic] the way that students interact with their field and interpret tasks, but it fails to teach the students how write [sic] at an academic level. Academic literacies argue [sic] then that the problems with student writing lies [sic] in the level of knowledge and identity rather than skill or socialization. The student perceives academic literacies as the ability to write "in a certain way" for "for a certain audience."

Extract 1 illustrates Anne's attempt to understand the framework and a somewhat partial understanding. A key point she seems to be taking from the Lea and Street is a contrast between the theoretical position they advocate—a view of writing as to do with knowledge and identity—and the way in which students tend to view academic writing, that is as the ability to "write in a certain way for a certain audience." However, she then deconstructs her own experience of academic writing, as in Extract 2.

EXTRACT 2: ANNE'S APPLICATION OF ACADEMIC LITERACIES THEORY TO HER OWN EXPERIENCE

> This all rings true in my own experiences. When I write an essay I adopt a voice appropriate for a student audience at times and not a voice which comes from a place of knowledge, as an academic talking among other academics.

Other times I stumble when I do have the right voice in my writing because I realize I don't KNOW very much about my subject. I don't know how to research, what to research or how to put all the facts together in a seamless piece of academic writing. It's forced, fractured. I believe that the more you know about the field the easier it is to write and present.

It's interesting to note that in the first extract Anne is attempting to express her learning/sense-making around academic literacies in a conventional impersonal academic style, whereas in Extract 2 she is expressing her sense-making as it relates to her *personally*, not only in the content, but in the language that she uses. Her anxiety about writing about the theoretical is perhaps signaled through the language errors at sentence level in Extract 1; in contrast, when she writes about the personal in Extract 2, Anne's writing contains fewer grammatical errors. Her "discoursal self" (Ivanič, 1998,p. 25) is less confident ("forced, fractured") when she struggles with the theoretical issues of academic literacies and more confident when she's writing about what she knows: her own experience.

In her attempts to make sense of academic literacies, in Extracts 3 and 4 Laura addresses the emancipatory possibilities of writing; Laura seems to see what Ivanič has called "possibilities for self-hood in socio-cultural and institutional contexts" (Ivanič, 1998, p. 27) in relationships between teachers and students engaged in creative writing and the wider contexts of "political and social power."

Extract 3: Laura's Understanding of the Emancipatory Power of an Academic Literacies Approach to Teaching Writing

[academic literacies theory] treats literacy as political and social power, acknowledging the variety of communicative practices whilst also taking into account the identity of the learner and institution.

Laura's reflection on the effect of applying academic literacies principles, in Extract 4, shows great emotion; her use of italics and punctuation, such as the exclamation mark, highlights the importance of this insight to her. What Ivanič refers to as her "discoursal self" is excited by the "possibilities for self-hood" in her disciplinary context.

Extract 4: Laura's Reflection on the Emancipatory Power of the Academic Literacies Approach

This is incredibly important to creative writing! I see teaching

creative writing as teaching a social and political form of power, as well as a subject in which identity is fundamentally important.

Laura's analysis of the relationship of academic literacies theory indicates that she understands core principles of the framework, including its focus on power and identity, and that she sees possibilities for application. In Extract 5, Laura reflects on how the diagram activity affected her understanding of academic literacies and begins to consider how she will apply this knowledge.

EXTRACT 5: LAURA'S REFLECTION ON THE DIAGRAM EXERCISE

I found [the diagram exercise] to be an extremely clever method for clarifying the teaching in our minds, discussing it with our peers and contextualizing it. I found it incredibly useful because it made me simplify the teaching for myself.

Students on the module find the reading troublesome at first because they often have not read much critical or scholarly writing to this point in their degree programme; making meaning from the text in groups encourages them to share and debate their understanding, while the diagram encourages simplification of complex ideas. The following examples show the range of conceptions students have of academic literacies principles, and highlight some similarities in how they privilege the approach above other ways of teaching writing.

In Extract 6, Christine reflects on her observation of tutorials in the Writing and Learning Centre, a service providing academic writing advice to students on any course at the university.

EXTRACT 6: CHRISTINE'S OBSERVATIONS OF TUTORING PRACTICE

The writing tutors didn't simply tell the students what was right and wrong with their work, instead they asked many questions and got the student thinking and analyzing their own work in order to understand for themselves how they could improve their work. This demonstrates the academic literacies theory because the student is made to develop their own knowledge and understanding and to adapt these within each subject that they study.

Christine sees academic literacies principles in practice when students are encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning. Similarly, Edie tries to explicitly use an academic literacies approach to structuring her peer-led session on professional copy-editing; Edie has chosen to run a workshop on editing because

it closely aligns to the course outcomes. She analyzes her tutoring approaches in Extract 7.

Extract 7: Edie's Analysis of Her Own Teaching

- A study skills approach: practical assessment of students' editorial skills;
- an academic socialization approach: open discussion within the class about why editing is important; and
- an academic literacies approach: checking to see that students have improved understanding of the importance of editing and what is required of them.

For Edie, an academic literacies approach means engaging students at a meta-cognitive level. Edie does not simply wish to teach editing skills; she also hopes to clarify the rationale for learning how to edit and empower students to meet expectations.

In her tutoring practice, Laura explores the issue of identity, making a connection between academic literacies and creative writing. The following extract demonstrates her explicit exploration of identity for students on a Creative Writing course, where creative outputs constitute the "academic" assessed work (as opposed to traditional critical essays, for example). Laura seems to be making connections between what Ivanič (1998) refers to as "autobiographical identity" ("we tend to write what we know") and "possibilities for self-hood" in the relationship between student and teacher.

Extract 8: Laura's Consideration of Identity When Teaching Writing

> In an unusual way I [as a student-tutor] will have an insight into the student's identity from looking at their writing; we tend to write what we know, in fact this is encouraged in creative writing, so it will be possible to gain an understanding of my student's psychology more so than in other subjects.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION: MAKING SENSE OF ACADEMIC LITERACIES AND ISSUES OF IDENTITY IN LEARNING

The design of the learning activities on the *Teaching Writing* module encourages students to define the key concepts of academic literacies theory (including the concepts' relationship to one another), apply the theory, and then reflect on the experi-

ences to deepen their knowledge. I ask students to keep a reflective journal precisely because of the connection between writing and meaning-making; this low-stakes and relatively informal writing provides an opportunity for students to develop their understanding of theories introduced on the module before they attempt to critically discuss them in a traditional essay. Anne's discomfort around finding a voice when writing about areas she feels she has little knowledge highlights the need to allow students a safe environment in which they can practice articulating their thoughts (without being formally assessed). The learning activities on the module are designed to move away from a "study skills" approach to teaching students how to write, teach writing, and write about teaching and not only socialize them into the academic conventions, but provide a platform for considering how their own identities and contexts might influence their own writing, learning, and teaching practices.

The issue of identity also influences the ways students on the *Teaching Writing* module experience learning, teaching, and assessment. The *Teaching Writing* students often have not written (what they consider) "academic" pieces of work before: their previous output is mainly creative or reflective texts rather than critical, academic essays. Again, Anne's uneasiness with writing about theory demonstrates how little these third-year students may have been required to engage with scholarly literature before taking this module, which raises questions about how the "signature pedagogies" of Creative Writing develop students' critical thinking and rhetorical communication skills.

The diagrams show how students define academic literacies, while the journal extracts demonstrate how students reflect on their experience of applying the theory. There is some evidence that students accept the benefits of using an academic literacies approach over a "study skills" or "academic socialization" approach, particularly when they begin applying the principles to their peer-tutoring practices. Laura sees a connection between concepts of identity and her practice as a creative writing student and teacher, Christine sees deeper learning fostered through students' self-assessment of their own writing, and Edie's application of the academic literacies theory leads her to design teaching activities that focus on students' understanding, rather than simple skills.

Laura considers how issues of identity might affect teacher/student relationships in Creative Writing and makes a connection between academic literacies and creative writing. Her reflections raise interesting questions about how we might view other forms of writing through an academic literacies lens. For Creative Writing students, creative output *is* "academic writing" because it is how they are assessed. The issues of privileged ways of writing, power, epistemology and identity raised by Lea and Street (1998) may influence debates about the craft and teaching of "creative" writing as much as they do the conversations about "academic" writing. The work the students do to critically analyze and apply principles of the academic literacies framework challenges aspects of their identity, but also opens

up, as for Laura and Edie, possibilities for self-hood in their identity as teachers when they focus on the empowerment of others.

Analysis of the extracts above is only a small beginning towards exploring how student-tutors can use principles of academic literacies theory in relation to their pedagogic practice and their own writing (both academic and creative).

REFERENCES

Ivanič, R. (1998). *Writing and identity: The discoursal construction of identity in academic writing.* Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Lea, M. R., & Street, B. (1998). Student writing in higher education: An academic literacies approach. *Studies in Higher Education, 23*(2), 157-172.

Shulman, L. (2005). Signature pedagogies in the professions. *Daedalus, 4*(3), 52-59.