Susan van Schalkwyk

When the teacher becomes the student: the acquisition of academic literacy revisited

The idea of successful postgraduate studies representing "a rite of passage" into the academic community is not new. Entry into the community is facilitated by immersion in the discipline. In my doctoral studies, I investigated the acquisition of academic literacy among a group of first-year students, tracking their first steps in becoming members of the broader academic community. This article describes the similarities between my experience and that of the students, highlighting the challenges that doctoral students face when seeking to negotiate their entry into the different discourse communities.

Wanneer die dosent 'n student word: die verwerwing van akademiese geletterdheid opnuut

Die gedagte daaraan dat suksesvolle nagraadse studies as 'n reis tot volwassenheid in die akademiese gemeenskap gesien word, verteenwoordig nie 'n nuwe benadering in die literatuur nie. Toegang tot die gemeenskap word deur volkome deelname in die dissipline, fasiliteer. In my doktorale studies het ek die verwerwing van akademiese geletterdheid van 'n groep eerstejaarstudente ondersoek deur hul eerste tree tot volwassenheid as lede van die breër akademiese gemeenskap te monitor. Die ooreenkomste tussen my en die studente se ervarings word in hierdie artikel omskryf. Die uitdagings wat doktorale studente ervaar terwyl hulle hul toegang tot die verskillende diskoersgemeenskappe verken, word beskryf.

Dr S C van Schalkwyk, Centre for Teaching and Learning, Stellenbosch University, Private Bag X1, Matieland 7602; E-mail: scvs@sun.ac.za

SUN MEDIA
BLOEMFONTEIN

The idea of successful postgraduate studies, in particular at doctoral level, representing "a rite of passage" (Andresen 1999) into the academic community is not new. Accordingly, the graduate becomes recognised as an academic or scholar who has something worth saying (Clark & Ivanič 1997) and with "an opinion" that has emerged from scholarly activities (Boughey 2005). Entry into the community is facilitated by immersion in the discipline (Gee 1998) such as would be expected during postgraduate research. For my own doctoral studies, I investigated the acquisition of academic literacy among a specific group of first-year students, exploring how they experienced their first steps in becoming members of the broader academic community.[1] The research pointed to the different aspects of this experience that served to either enable or hamper their acquisition, and how their own identities and the "cultural and linguistic capital" they brought with them to the learning experience influenced the process (Walker 2006).

As a sub-theme of the research, I documented my own, parallel journey of acquisition – as a former university teacher who had now become the student. There was much in common between my own experience and that of the students who participated in my study. My journey was similarly enabled and hampered by the identity and "capital" that I brought to the research process. Adopting a reflective stance in this way was important for my own learning and teaching practice as I embarked on postgraduate supervision myself. Accordingly, it is as reflective practitioner that I position this article (Schön 1987).

In the first section I draw on the considerable body of scholarship in the field of academic literacy to provide an understanding of the concept in the context of this article. Using the findings of my doctoral research as a map, I then describe how as doctoral student I negotiated my own entry into the academic community. I reflect on those aspects that served to either enable or hamper my own learning, highlighting some of the challenges faced by doctoral students, positing what this might mean for the practice of university teachers and research supervisors. Northedge (2003a: 22) suggested that

1   Cf Van Schalkwyk 2008 for full details of the study.

students entering higher education "gain the ability to participate in prestigious and powerful knowledge communities". Insight into how this occurs can offer the postgraduate supervisor an "equally powerful lever that could facilitate the crossing of discourse boundaries" (Van Schalkwyk 2007: 965). It is thus my intention that this article will contribute to the understanding of all who participate in these knowledge communities as to their joint responsibility in ensuring the maintenance of the community and the induction of newcomers into it (Brew 2002).

1.   Rite of passage: acquiring academic literacy

What does it mean to be academically literate? This overview offers a response to this question in the interests of providing definitional clarity. At the same time, drawing on the extensive literature review conducted for my doctoral research, a synopsis of some of the theoretical positions towards the acquisition of academic literacy that framed the study, are shared.

1.1 Understanding academic literacy

While the evolution of this term has an extremely interesting history (cf Van Schalkwyk 2008), early definitions highlight a focus on literacy at university level, with writing being the most obvious product. Academic literacy was described as "a compound of linguistic, conceptual and epistemological rules and norms of the academe" where the student has the "capacity to use written language to perform those functions required by the [university] culture in ways and at a level judged to be acceptable by the reader" (Ballard & Clanchy 1988: 8). Language, they argued, could not be separated from the culture within which it was being used. A university has a very distinct culture that frames the way it requires language to function, including producing work that demonstrates clear argument and analytical reasoning. Students are expected to follow the rules for argument, provide evidence for assertions they make, define terms and use a style appropriate to discussion at university level. In this context, adhering to these apparent rules of engagement could contribute greatly to being perceived

as academically literate. Novice students are expected to treat the rules of academe, in general, and those of the different disciplines, in particular, with respect, and are often in awe of them. They are expected to adopt "university-speak", mimicking, wherever possible, the style, register and approach of the academe.

The idea that a university has a distinct culture, one that directs the way things are done and therefore defines the way in which incoming students should engage with it, would not necessarily be contested. Yet this tells only half the story and has the potential to, albeit inadvertently, disregard the agency on the part of the many students from diverse backgrounds and with differing abilities and levels of preparedness, both undergraduate and postgraduate, who seek entry into it. Recent theorists, drawing on the work of the *New Literacy Studies,* have adopted a more sensitive and culturally aware understanding of academic literacy describing it as "a social practice, […] that is always embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles" (Street 2003: 77). Literacy then becomes recognised as a dynamic concept that will differ from context to context, from culture to culture, and so on. Thus, if academic literacy is about knowing how to speak and behave, how to read and write at university, specifically within a particular academic discourse, one ought to be able to acquire such literacy by being exposed to and participating in the relevant discourse community (cf Johns 1997, Boughey 2000, Johl 2002).

1.2 Acquiring academic literacy

Acquisition has been likened to the student serving an apprenticeship within a particular discipline as s/he becomes familiar with its discourse (Paxton 1998: 136). This perspective is a useful one, but requires explication as to an understanding of *discourse*. In this instance, the work of James Gee (1990: 143) provides much insight, and his description of discourse is worth reproducing *verbatim*:

> … a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or 'social network' or to signal (that one is playing) a socially meaningful role.

Gee's definition is particularly significant as it encapsulates a number of themes that are central to any discussion on academic literacy, such as its social nature, the importance of the group or network, the notion of a "way of doing", the importance of identity, and the need to participate or play a role.

Academic communities often find it difficult to make explicit that which to them may be self-evident, and are often unaware of the need to do so (cf Ballard & Clanchy 1988, Moore 1994, McKenna 2004). There is an implicit expectation that students should pick up what is expected of them as they go along. However, many students, notably the weaker students, often find it difficult to discern the different discipline-specific codes or conventions, especially if they have not been "exposed to the implicit rules of mainstream, powerful cultures" (Niven 2005: 779) such as may be found in academe. At the same time, the cultural literacies that students bring with them to the academic experience are often devalued as they prove to be at odds with the academic or disciplinary expectations they encounter at the university. Thus the student's own identity and agency may be absent or rendered impotent. Often students will embrace the anonymity of the academic discourse in a detached fashion rather than portray their own identities through it (Canagarajah 2002: 37).

In the process of acquisition, considerable power resides with the reader (the assessor) who issues judgement on the level of expertise displayed by the student. The identity of the student writer may often be lost in a skewed power relationship where the written work of the student, typically the academic essay for the undergraduate student or the dissertation for the postgraduate student "can be seen as a dialogue between unequal participants". The student seeks to respond to the task, but the decision as to what is an appropriate answer is determined by the discipline which is interpreted by the lecturer – this all within a unique institutional culture.

This presents a particular dilemma in South Africa, given its rich, complex cultural heritage – a dilemma that has not been extensively documented. "[W]hat space is there in this tightly bounded sequence [of lecturer, institution, discipline] for students to challenge or respond asserting their authority?" asks Starfield (2004: 67).It is

difficult to ignore the often powerful socio-political overtones that inevitably become part of the debate on academic literacy and, in particular, academic writing. Social, historical and political forces impact on the student's access to the apprenticeships offered in the "privileged discourses of the academy" (Starfield 2004: 67). Clearly, academic literacy speaks to much more than just reading and writing – it is a social practice that comes with power, multiple dimensions, and "already loaded with ideological and policy presuppositions" (Street 2003: 77).

1.3 Participating in the academic community

Understanding the university as a social learning system which comprises many different "communities of practice" (Wenger 2000: 229) offers a response to some of the above concerns. There appear to be many points of congruence between the most recent approaches to academic literacy and the role of such communities of practice. In discussing social learning systems, Wenger (2000: 226) provides a conceptual framework that defines learning "in terms of social *competence* and personal *experience*" and suggests that knowing "is a matter of displaying competences defined in social communities". The more opportunities are created for socialisation within a particular community (discourse), the more likely the students are to expand their range of competency within it (Cummins 2000: 62). According to Wenger (2000: 229), competence in a community requires

> ... understanding the enterprise well enough to be able to contribute to it […] being able to engage with the community and be trusted as a partner […] to have access to [a shared] repertoire and be able to use it appropriately.

A number of issues are pertinent in this instance. In a community of practice, simply understanding the "ways of doing" is not enough. Such understanding should lead to action: to engagement in, contribution to, or (drawing again on Gee), to fulfilling a role in the community. This requires that the community makes itself available to those seeking entry, creating a space where even the novice or newcomer may contribute to the body of knowledge that defines it and, potentially, also shape and change it. It assumes a level of trust and

recognises that even as the teacher is initiating the student into the discourse, the practices implicit therein might be evolving.

It is important to note that even though the process of acculturation into a discipline presupposes that students will acquire a new set of values and even identities that may differ somewhat from those with which they entered the university, this need not mean that former identities are shed. Rather, suggests Wenger (2000: 239):

> … our ability to deal productively with boundaries depends on our ability to engage and suspend our identities […] opening up our identities to other ways of being in the world (cf also Entwistle & Peterson 2004).

This, however, ought to be true for the insiders as well as the newcomers, who themselves may change through being exposed to the knowledge and competence of the apprentice (cf Wenger 2000, Northedge 2003a). Hodkinson (2004: 16) offers an interesting perspective for the purposes of this article when, in commenting on the activities within and between insiders and newcomers, he suggests that within the community of educational researchers, "educational research practices change as members of the community try out different things, and as one generation of researcher is displaced by another".

In describing a community of practice, Wenger (2000: 226) introduces the notion of boundaries – the edge of the community so to speak – and suggests that these are seldom clearly defined or fixed. In addition, there is an area in-between, a periphery, where those who intend to become members of the community are often found. The progression towards becoming an insider, serving the apprenticeship described earlier, often commences here. Canagarajah (2002: 30) however, warns that the access in the periphery must be legitimate if the student is to comprehend the discourses and the practice. In addition, he reminds one that students come to the community already having membership elsewhere, their own identities, which could alternately hinder or facilitate their participation depending on the extent to which there is congruence between the different communities' way of doing. Thus, there is a need for legitimate peripheral participation which creates opportunities for students to be engaged with the specific practice that characterises the discipline.

Such participation "is ideal till students have developed the insider knowledge and confidence to become full participants" (Canagarajah 2002: 30). Unfortunately, many academics having long been accepted members of the discourse community (insiders) are unaware of the importance of consciously facilitating such enabling conversations and therefore fail to make explicit underlying and assumed expectations (Ballard & Clanchy 1988: 13, Williams 2005: 157).

Clearly, there is no seamless transition from outsider to insider and from one community to another. Many students struggle for voice and their experience is more "counter" discursive than "trans" discursive. For example, in my study students spoke of how their "way of doing" at school was of little value, even problematic, when applied in the university context:

> When I started university I was very confident in my writing skills. This was something I did not have a problem with in high school, but unfortunately, I have discovered it is not the same here at the university … [F, 2006, #9][2]

This tension between what novices bring to the academic discussion and the extent to which it is valued emerges as one of the themes discussed in the section that follows. A consideration of how this can create meaningful opportunities for engaging in academic work is also provided (Zamel 1997).

2. 'Becoming' a doctoral graduate

The above discussion has foregrounded several elements that are integral to the acquisition of academic literacy or to "becoming" academically literate (Leibowitz 2004). These include being exposed to the discipline, having the rules of that discipline made explicit, and being able to adapt one's identity to effect participation in the discipline. All of these should enable one to ultimately contribute to the further extension of the discipline. This is based on the understanding that the opportunity for participation is fair and that there

---

2   Reference indicates gender, year of interview, and interviewee number for that year.

is an awareness, on the part of the disciplinary expert, as to the value that the novice can add to the community. In my study, the students reported on how they experienced these and other aspects of the acquisition process (Van Schalkwyk *et al* 2009). In many cases, their experiences pointed to fewer enabling opportunities than one might have hoped. Many of their experiences mirrored my own. In this section I draw on some of the key findings from the study and highlight these points of congruence.

2.1 Entering the academic community

The students who participated in the study had been placed on an extended degree programme. This meant that they were identified as being underprepared for university studies and required additional academic support. Having been granted access to the university, the students had been confronted with the conventions and norms of the different disciplines and the diverse expectations of their lecturers:

> Subject A definitely has its own language […] incredible terminology that you definitely must know and use in the correct context otherwise you are going to completely lose the people and the philosophy [F, 2007, #1]

> … it's very structured, at university there has to be that specific way … [F, 2007, #8]

While it was clear that students quickly realised that there are conventions that govern the "ways of doing", determining what the conventions actually were proved more difficult. Much of the communication seemed opaque and complex:

> There's like, they've taught us […] I can't explain it right […] for instance … we're never allowed to say 'I' this, 'I' that […] it was always supposed to be […] what's the word? Like 'one must do this', never 'me'. [F, 2007, #4]

Students discover clues as to what is expected of them as part of the learning experience. Whether overtly expressed or covertly implied, the words that the lecturer uses, the texts that the students engage with, the questions posed in the assessment tasks and the way in which the responses to these questions are assessed, all provide pointers. The extent to which the students are successful in correctly

interpreting the clues or "breaking the code" is to a large extent dependent on whether or not the student sees and understands the relevance thereof. The analysis of the students' responses highlighted how in many instances they had either only partially understood or totally misinterpreted these clues:

> … [use] big words […] try to sound academic … [M, 2007, #10].
>
> I would say in the essay question […] you give more of your own opinion […] so you improve on expressing yourself [M, 2006, #4].
>
> … then we mustn't put our opinions on the short story. You mustn't say, you mustn't judge [F, 2006, #5].

In addition, the students spoke of how their results in tests and examinations were much lower than they had anticipated and that they were uncertain as to how to improve:

> I was also disappointed where I was, sometimes I study really, really hard and I just don't get the marks I expected […] and then like what must I do to get a better mark? [F, 2007, #7]

My initial experience of the qualitative research domain, which seemed to be characterised by an array of contradictions and unresolved debates, was similarly unrewarding. As I engaged in Wenger's periphery I was constantly challenged to adapt, even redefine, former understandings. Each endeavour to find answers in the literature seemed only to throw up an even more complex set of questions than previously. Miles & Huberman (1994: 309) suggest that "[d]oing qualitative analysis means living for as long as possible with the complexity and ambiguity, coming to terms with it". I was to realise that finding an appropriate way with which to deal with the ambiguity and becoming more adept at picking up the clues would eventually facilitate the learning process, but the experience was neither easy nor comfortable (cf Meyer & Land 2005). As increasing numbers of students embarking on postgraduate studies in South Africa are doing so in a language that is not a mother tongue, supervisors need to be mindful of these challenges. Students can miss the subtle clues that they encounter as they navigate the complex texts that comprise the different disciplines and this can be both demoralising and disabling. It is incumbent on the experts to explicitly guide their students' reading and to support their participation in

an unknown knowledge community (Northedge 2003a: 17), at least until they acquire a measure of familiarity of the terrain.

2.2 Academic writing

Participation in a knowledge community, in particular the postgraduate community, is predominantly manifest in its writing. In their responses, the students in the study identified writing at university as one of their key challenges. This is important given that reading and writing are regarded as critical success factors for students. The students described the way in which they had to adapt their approaches to reading and writing when they came to university and how they found this difficult to do. They spoke of a new way of doing that felt uncomfortable and they expressed uncertainty as to whether they were "doing it right". It was clear from many of the students' comments that often they were not:

> I don't yet feel one hundred per cent about my writing skills because I never know exactly what the lecturer expects of me … [F, 2006, #12].
>
> Why all the trouble? […] I don't know why one has to use such long words and such high words just to say what you want to say… [F, 2007, #5].

Much of what the students said echoes the experiences of so many doctoral students, including my own. Henning (2004: 101) suggested that, "[t]he true test of a competent researcher comes in the analysis of the data, a process that requires analytical craftsmanship and the ability to capture understanding of the data *in writing"* [my emphasis]. I am prompted to ask: Where does one learn to do that? For many students, both undergraduate and postgraduate, writing in the discipline presents what Meyer & Land (2003: 1), drawing on the work of Perkins, call "troublesome knowledge". Such knowledge "is conceptually difficult, appears counter-intuitive or 'alien'". For newcomers, the requirements of the discipline and the discourse itself may result in former, familiar practices feeling strange and complex (Meyer & Land 2003: 9). As a mature student who had always found it "easy to write", I experienced this acutely. Early assignments were rejected as being uncritical and subjective. Subsequent work, in which

I sought to rectify these errors, elicited requests for "foregrounding my authorial voice", giving my opinion, taking a stand, and so on. My supervisors suggested that resolution of this apparent conflict necessitated participating in the disciplinary community, reading (again) within the discipline and presenting my work in a more public domain. The empirical work that I conducted for my PhD was conducted over a two-year period with some of the same students participating in both sets of interviews. It is important to note that several of their responses highlighted how a writing intensive module had facilitated their acquisition of academic literacy – albeit not expressed in those terms:

> … [before] I would just take the information and just take it as truth, […] but, uhm, I was taught throughout the year you just, you know, always question what you read, always, you know, scrutinise [M, 2007, #3].

At this point it is important to consider the heterogeneity that exists across different disciplines. The students highlighted this as an aspect that added to the challenges they experienced, recounting how the same word would have different conceptual connotations from one module to another:

> … they've (Subject A and B) got similar terms, but then they explain different contexts [M, 2007, #2].

This, too, was my experience. In working towards a PhD in Higher Education my study was positioned firmly within the field of teaching and learning at university. Nevertheless, in surveying the literature I had to venture into the realm of language education, anthropology, sociolinguistics and the ethnography of communication. My two supervisors, one from higher education and curriculum studies, the other in language education, similarly brought divergent understandings and expectations. Even at the point of examination and during the oral defence of my dissertation, I had to remain mindful of the differing frames of reference represented around the discussion table. In retrospect, of course, I recognise the value of these different perspectives. I can see how each understanding contributed to the richness and depth of the learning process. Nevertheless, I described the venture as requiring "considerable effort" and experienced "returning to base"

(my home discipline) as "a great relief" (Van Schalkwyk 2008: 108). It is with much empathy that I hear the student voices:

> … here [at university] you are expected to use your own ideas, but it's other people's stuff you must get in […] you must include references […]' and 'sometimes it's confusing because Subject D and Subject C use the same words […] the concepts are the same […] different in context […] it confuses you sometimes' [M, 2007, #9].

2.3 Adapting one's identity

At the start of the academic year all first-year students at the University are required to complete a survey that seeks to determine students' expectations for their university experience and their perceptions of their levels of competence. One of the interesting findings of the study was the extent to which the students generally displayed markedly positive perceptions in terms of their academic and related abilities (Van Schalkwyk 2008: 149-51). This same source also projected extremely positive expectations in terms of the students' potential university achievements, expectations that would probably be described as unrealistic in light of their school results. These responses were unexpected, the more so because as a group they rated themselves higher than had the entire first-year cohort in the Faculty. This is important given that part of one's identity is encapsulated in one's perception of self and, therefore, also in how one envisages the future (Leibowitz *et al* 2005). In her work on student agency, Walker (2006: 7) has argued that an appropriate disposition towards learning "… turns on a confident sense of self …". This would suggest that tapping into the positive self-image of these students could be significant in facilitating their success. It is unfortunate that the students' later responses indicated that these positive perceptions and expectations had been somewhat tempered, in some cases to the extent that the students had entirely abandoned their initial dreams:

> I am just trying […] to survive. I wanted to do Psychology, my Honours and then an M in Psychology. But now this is not even an issue for me, I am just here [F, 2007, #5].

Many postgraduate students will acknowledge a similar recalibration of expectations and perceptions as to what they realistically can achieve

– notably with respect to timeframes and workload as they have to balance work, studies and family commitments. The "confident sense of self" is easily dented as the reality of the task confronts the fledgling researcher. Towards the end of my period of study, while facing the reality of having to return to work after a two-month study break, I received conflicting feedback from my two supervisors. Responding to this critique left me feeling exiled and vulnerable. Moving on from that period of uncertainty required taking a stance, finding my own identity among the community of scholars and deciding for myself what would be an appropriate way forward.

As shown earlier, however, the students' comments suggested that this was not the case for them, rather describing how they, generally uncritically, dispensed with former "ways of doing" to instead provide what they believed the university required. In my study, concerns about students' suitability for higher education were raised by some of the lecturers who were interviewed. Time pressures, resource constraints and the "economics of higher education" were cited as making it increasingly difficult to address the additional needs of the diverse body of students. However, widening participation has not only led to an increase in student numbers at undergraduate level, but has also resulted in a dearth of, for example, masters' programmes which are characterised by adult learners who are often working full-time. In this context one needs to ask: What happens to the cultural capital that one brings to the learning community? Surely each of us brings an existing store of knowledge and understanding that ought to have currency and thus contribute to the learning process (cf Kern 2000, Buckridge & Guest 2007)? This places a responsibility on the part of the institution to consciously engage with the identities and "*phronesis* knowledge" with which students enter academe (Henning 2004: 103). While the data generated during my study did not provide any clear direction as to the extent to which this was happening in their experience, some of the students' responses did point to enabling opportunities that would expand their awareness or bring them to a place where they might see things "in a different way" (Entwistle & Peterson 2004: 409):

> Subject B just gives me a greater understanding of how the world works and how I can, I myself can, uhm, influence or be part of this world language and this world system. […] Subject A also just teaches you to, to think in a different way, you know, uhm, like economists think differently, so do philosophers and psychologists think differently and […] its taught me to be able to think in a unique way [M, 2007, #3].

Having worked successfully in industry and later as a university teacher, I sought entry into the research community, bringing with me a particular work ethic and knowledge base that provided me with confidence and a strong sense of self. My supervisors sought wisely to lock into aspects of structure, timelines and systems that made sense to me from my previous work experience and wisely counselled me to delve into the literature to find others of like mind. Most importantly, they encouraged me to question, to explore, to critique, to "think in a unique way".

2.4 Participating in the community of practice

From the earlier discussion it is clear that the acquisition of academic literacy does not occur simply by virtue of one being exposed to the particular community of practice or disciplinary discourse. The need to be actively engaged in the discipline is a necessary pre-condition. The extent to which the students described their own learning experiences as having provided opportunity for such engagement and subsequent analyses of, for example, test and examination papers, revealed conflicting information. The limited potential of the lecture for encouraging engagement was emphasised. It was rather the small group tutorial that was considered a potential site for student-tutor and student-student engagement. In this instance, the students felt safe to ask questions, share their opinions and generally try out their "discourse-legs":

> … the tutorial just uhm, uhm gets a (feeling) of nervousness uhm off your shoulder. In lectures you feel you, you can't answer or ask this question 'cause you feel you might be stupid, but in smaller groups you, you just have a greater confidence […] and the lecturer in the tutorials just concentrates on you, you feel more important than say in the bigger lecture … [M, 2007, #3].

At Stellenbosch University, the site at which the research was undertaken, adopting a student-centred approach to learning is underwritten in the university's Teaching and Learning Policy. Adopting such an approach implies a reorganisation of the roles of both the lecturer and the student, where the latter takes greater responsibility for his/her own learning, and where the lecturer assumes the role of an expert facilitator who seeks to open up conversations with the students so that they can take part in the process of making meaning (Northedge 2003b). Some of the students seemed to understand this need:

> I'm not saying that everyone must have a relationship with the lecturer […] but here and there at least the lecturer should link a face to a number […] then the lecturer and the student can perhaps understand one another's work better […] I will understand what he means in the long questions [F, 2006, #8].

As had been found in the literature, however, other students in the study sought comfort in compliance – uncritically doing what they thought the lecturers wanted, reflecting a reproductive conception of learning (Entwistle & Peterson 2004):

> … its not that I am negative about learning, it's either learn what you want to do, or learn what lecturer has given, then give it back in the exams … [F, 2007, #5].

One might assume that the relationship between the postgraduate student and the supervisor is far more personal, and almost intimate. This intimacy, which represents high-stakes interaction for both parties, is often complex. Tensions can exist as the supervisor might be expected to fulfil multiple roles as teacher, mentor and guide. At the same time, however, there is a responsibility to also serve as critic, reviewer and assessor. The need for opening up clear channels of communication at this level is self-evident, and probably common practice in many postgraduate supervision relationships across the world. However, the enabling conversations to which Northedge (2003b) is referring suggest a further dimension which implies the disciplinary conversations that will facilitate a learning process, a growing process, in which the making of meaning becomes a joint endeavour.

One aspect of my original research that has not been foregrounded in this article is that of language and it is important to explain this

omission. For many of the students in the study, the language of learning was not their mother tongue. The complexities associated with the acquisition of academic literacy when this is the case have been well-documented in the literature (cf also Van Schalkwyk 2008). However, given that this was one complexity that I was spared, I was wary of being so presumptuous as to assume the level of understanding that I claim for the other challenges described in this article.

3. Achieving a 'liberating literacy'

In academic discourses, having an opinion "is constructed out of scholarship, which involves examining the work of authorities and building a case that is personally meaningful out of their work and one's own research" (Boughey 2005: 645). Earlier claims to self-confidence notwithstanding, my own identity as an older student who waited many years before entering the academic community led to some hesitancy on my part before I felt comfortable to project myself as an academic or scholar who has "anything worth saying" (Clark & Ivanič 1997: 152). I now feel able to fulfil a role within the academic community. I can critique and shape the discourse of my chosen discipline. Jacobs (2004: 477) describes this status as having achieved "liberating literacy". In the South African context I would contend that literacy of this nature is desirable and is a fundamental principle upon which I based my study. Johl (2002: 57) neatly explains my own understanding in suggesting that the focus of critical (academic) literacy should be to make students aware of:

- the different and competing discourses that are present in society, specifically in academe;

- the way in which dominant discourses can (and do) suppress more marginalised discourses and that this can create a sense of inferiority among the members of those less dominant discourses, and

- that it is possible to challenge the prevailing discourse and to contribute to the reconstruction of academic discourse so as to contri-

bute to the emancipation of all students, irrespective of language or culture (translated from Afrikaans).[3]

Johl's list is important for all students, from first-year through to doctoral studies. In essence, it is about giving students a voice, a critical voice. But it is also significant for those of us who teach and who have been given the responsibility of postgraduate supervision. We need to be mindful of our students' potential to change not only their own identities and in so doing achieve a more superior conception both of learning and of knowledge (Entwistle & Peterson 2004), but to also change the prevailing discourse and influence the discipline that we so fiercely defend.

---

3   Kritiese geletterdheid het ten doel om 'n kritiese bewyssyn by studente (én akademici) te kweek van die kontesterende diskoerse wat in samelewings sirkuleer, van die maniere waarop dominante diskoerse gemarginaliseerde diskoerse kan onderdruk en 'n minderwaardigheidsgevoel by lede van nie-dominante of gemarginaliseerde groepe kan wek, van die moontlikheid om dominante diskoerse uit te daag en van die moontlikhede om vanuit 'n verskeidenheid posisies mee te werk aan die konstruksie en herkonstruksie van akademiese diskoerse wat die emansipasie van alle studente, ongeag kulturele herkoms en taak.

Bibliography

ANDRESEN L
   1999. Supervision revisited: thoughts on scholarship, pedagogy and postgraduate research. Wisker & Sutcliffe (eds) 1999: 25-38.

ANGELIL-CARTER S (ed)
   1998. *Access to success: literacy in academic contexts.* Cape Town: UCT Press.

ANGELIL-CARTER S, D BOND, M PAXTON & L THESEN (eds)
   1994. *Language in academic development at UCT.* Cape Town: UCT.

BALLARD B & J CLANCHY
   1988. Literacy in the university: an 'anthropological' approach. Taylor *et al* (eds) 1988: 7-23.

BOUGHEY C
   2000. Multiple metaphors in an understanding of academic literacy. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice* 6(3): 279-90.

   2005. 'Epistemological' access to the university: an alternative perspective. *South African Journal of Higher Education* 19(3): 638-50.

BOURDIEU P, J PASSERON & M DE SAINT MARTIN
   1994. *Academic discourse: linguistic misunderstanding and professorial power*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

BREW A
   2002. Research and the academic developer: a new agenda. *The International Journal for Academic Development* 7(2): 112-22.

BUCKRIDGE M & R GUEST
   2007. A conversation about pedagogical responses to increased diversity in university classrooms. *Higher Education Research & Development* 26(2): 133-46.

CANAGARAJAH S
   2002. Multilingual writers and the academic community: towards a critical relationship. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* 1: 29-44.

CLARK R & R IVANIČ
   1997. *The politics of writing.* London: Routledge.

CUMMINS J
   2000. *Language, power and pedagogy: bilingual children in the crossfire.* Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

ENTWISTLE N J & E R PETERSON
   2004. Conceptions of learning and knowledge in higher education: relationships with study behaviour and influences of learning environments. *International Journal of Educational Research* 41: 407-28.

GEE J P
   1990. *Social linguistics and literacies: ideology in discourses.* London: Falmer Press.

1998. What is literacy? Zamel & Spack (eds) 1998: 51-9.

Henning E
2004. *Finding your way in qualitative research.* Pretoria: Van Schaik.

Hodkinson P
2004. Research as a form of work: expertise, community and methodological objectivity. *British Educational Research Journal* 30(1): 9-26.

Jacobs C
2005. On being an insider on the outside: new spaces for integrating academic literacies. *Teaching in Higher Education* 10(4): 475-87.

Johl R
2002. Akademiese geletterdheid: van studievaardighede tot kritiese geletterdheid. *Journal for Language Teaching* 36(1 & 2): 41-60.

Johns A M
1997. *Text, role and context: developing academic literacies.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kern R
2000. *Literacy and language teaching.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Leibowitz B
2004. Becoming academically literate in South Africa: lessons from student accounts for policymakers and educators. *Language and Education* 18(1): 35-52.

Leibowitz B, H Adendorff, S Daniels, A Loots, S Nakasa, N Ngxabazi, A van der Merwe & I van Deventer
2005. The relationship between identity, language and teaching and learning in higher education in South Africa. *Per Linguam* 21(2): 23-37.

Leibowitz B, S C van Schalkwyk, A van der Merwe, N Herman & G Young
2009. *Focus on first-year success: perspectives emerging from South Africa and beyond*. Stellenbosch: Sun Media.

McKenna S
2004. Lecturers' discourses about the interplay between language and learning. *South African Journal of Higher Education* 18(2): 278-87.

Meyer J H F & R Land
2003. Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge: linkages to ways of thinking and practising within the disciplines. *ETL Project.* University of Edinburgh.

2005. Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge: epistemological considerations and a conceptual framework for teaching and learning. *Higher Education* 49: 373-88.

Miles M B & A M Huberman
1994. *Qualitative data analysis.* 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

MOORE R
1994. Towards a writing curriculum: proficiency and politics in student academic writing. Angelil-Carter (ed) 1994: 36-49.

NIVEN P M
2005. Exploring first year students' and their lecturers' constructions of what it means to read in a humanities discipline: a conflict of frames? *South African Journal of Higher Education* 19(4): 777-89.

NORTHEDGE A
2003a. Rethinking teaching in the context of diversity. *Teaching in Higher Education* 8(1): 17-32.

2003b. Enabling participation in academic discourse. *Teaching in Higher Education* 8(2): 169-80.

PAXTON M
1998. Transforming assessment practices into learning practices. Angelil-Carter (ed) 1998: 136-58.

RAVELLI L J & R A ELLIS (eds)
2004. *Analysing academic writing: contextualised frameworks.* London: Continuum.

SCHÖN D
1987. *Educating the reflective practitioner.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

STARFIELD S
2004. Word power: negotiating success in a first-year sociology essay. Ravelli & Ellis (eds) 2004: 66-83.

STREET B
2003. What's 'new' in New Literacy Studies? Critical approaches to literacy in theory and practice. *Current Issues in Comparative Education* 5(2): 77-91.

TAYLOR G, B BALLARD, V BEASLEY, H K BOCK, J CLANCHY & P NIGHTINGALE (eds)
1988. *Literacy by degrees.* Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

VAN SCHALKWYK S C
2007. Crossing discourse boundaries – students' diverse realities when negotiating entry into knowledge communities. *South African Journal of Higher Education* 21(7): 954-68.

2008. Acquiring academic literacy: a case of extended degree programme students at Stellenbosch University. Unpubl PhD thesis in Higher Education. Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch.

VAN SCHALKWYK S C, E BITZER & C VAN DER WALT
2009. Acquiring academic literacy: a case of first-year extended degree programme students. *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies* 27(2): 187-99.

WALKER M
2006. Identity, learning and agency in higher education. Unpubl presentation at the interdisciplinary colloquium Identity and Learning, 30-21 March 2006, Stellenbosch University.

WENGER E
2000. Communities of practice and social learning systems. *Organisation* 7(2): 225-46.

WHISKER G & N SUTCLIFFE (eds)
1999. Good practice in post-graduate supervision. SEDA, Paper 106. Birmingham Staff and Educational Development Association.

WILLIAMS P
2005. Lecturer and first year student (mis)understandings of assessment task verbs: 'mind the gap'. *Teaching in Higher Education* 10(2): 157-73.

ZAMEL V
1997. Towards a model of trans-culturation. *TESOL Quarterly* 31(2): 341-51.

ZAMEL V & R. SPACK (eds)
1998. *Negotiating academic literacies: teaching and learning across languages and cultures*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.