

0024

Through a glass darkly: Do lecturers really know what they want from students' writing ?

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Background

An obsession with students' writing in higher education is not surprising as writing is the primary means by which students communicate their learning in higher education. Written texts form one of the primary means by which students in all disciplines access information in higher education and writing is the most common way lecturers assess what students have learnt. Never will most people have to care so much about their writing as when they are undergraduates. This paper explores the idea that despite the universally acknowledged importance of writing to higher education many lecturers have not really thought about what they actually want or expect when they ask their students to write.

In their work on professional development for higher education lecturers Lea & Steirer, (2000) argue that many lecturers would benefit from professional programmes designed to support them as writing developers; just as much research suggests that students would benefit from a more coherent approach to specifically developing their writing (Wingate 2006). However there is often little coherent commitment in universities to developing a coherent and systematic writing programme around students' writing for lecturers. Too often students' writing development remains predominately bolt-on and piecemeal, whilst for lecturers it is practically non-existent. (Doloughan, 2001).

My work on students' writing development stems from a New Literacy Studies (NLS) perspective. Street's 'ideological' view of literacy argues writing has many different forms, and a variety of purposes (1984). These forms and functions are essentially a product of social interaction and as such are embedded within the communities they take place in. Using this approach I argue that successful writing as an undergraduate requires students to develop certain kinds of 'situated' writing practices particular to higher education. Furthermore these practices conform to specific institutional discursual conventions around writing that lecturers recognise and reward accordingly (Lillis, 2001).

NLS engages educational researchers, like myself, in a critical discussion of how and why particular writing practices reflect and shape the world view of individuals and their sense of their place in any given discourse or community.

This paper argues therefore that before higher education can begin to realistically deliver effective writing development for students and support lecturers as writing developers there need to be a thorough exploration of the values and attitudes underpinning the discourse around writing in higher education that informs and shapes lecturers expectations and perceptions of students' writing.

Research Questions

This paper argues that the issue of students' writing and writing development in higher education is problematic for lecturers on a number of different levels both practical and theoretical. I essentially want to address the question 'What are lecturers' perceptions about the purpose of students' writing and writing development and where do they come from?' I ask this question in order that I may deconstruct and interrogate assumptions around writing and writing development that might appear self-evident, in order to open up spaces for it to be discussed in new and innovative ways that may have a relevance for future pedagogies of writing and educational research (Maclure and Stronach 1997). In this way I want my research to disrupt, defamiliarise and problematise the 'disourse of transparency' that surrounds writing and writing development in higher education (Lillis & Turner, 2001).

I want to show how the notion of a saturated discourse around writing and writing development in higher education creates highly charged relationships between lecturers and students which cannot be avoided and which have significant effects on all parties involved. This points to an important paradox central to this paper, namely that an issue, which is as highly visible and charged as students' writing in higher education, can be rendered invisible by its very situatedness within the domain.

This invisibility is, I suggest, one of the reasons why writing and its development are particularly problematic for lecturers in pedagogic terms. For example, explicit instructions about writing for students (often in the form of assessment guidelines, marking criteria and learning outcomes) are often delivered via terminology that presents itself as clear but which in practice is often vague and highly contested, not least between different disciplines and individual lecturers (Lea & Street, 1998). There is a lack of pedagogy in higher education about teaching writing as a process embedded in subject specialisms. Instead lecturers are often encouraged to treat writing as a finished product, namely the assignment. In the paper I explore how situated theories of writing can inform discussions about writing in a way that allows the norms underpinning notions of 'value' and correctness explicit in the assessment of students' writing to be discussed and challenged in a more process-led way.

Methods

My theoretical stance on language locates lecturers' perspectives on students' writing and writing development within a situated theory of practice. I am interested in how individuals are always active transformers of the literacies that they employ, not just passive recipients. In particular, given the focus of this study, I increasingly want to explore the ways in which lecturers and students are engaged in an inherently dialectical and unstable relationship around writing in which both parties actively produce, consume and transform each others' writing (and that of others).

I argue in this paper that writing in higher education cannot be free from politics and its use is intimately connected with discourses operating around knowledge in that sphere of activity. As a post-structurally reflective researcher I believe that individuals can only tell multiple, possibly competing or conflicting stories about themselves or their identities and about the societies they inhabit. In this spirit the paper offers a critical analysis of educational relationships which recognises that students' writing and writing development in higher education operates within a number of interrelated sites that range across and within the research setting and which have wider political and social ramifications.

This paper argues that lecturers' perceptions about students' writing do not exist in a vacuum, nor can they be divorced from the values and attitudes of the discourse of higher education within which they operate. My interpretation of lecturers' perceptions is underpinned by a theory of meaning-making. My understanding of meaning-making includes notions of culture, norms, understandings, social reality, ideology, beliefs, worldview, perspective or stereotypes (Lofland & Lofland, 1996). Moreover, perceptions are, mutable or 'plastic', this means that they can change or be changed in different ways over time (Churchland, 1979). In this paper I look at how individual lecturers interviewed experience writing in their professional world in different ways and develop perceptions about what they have experienced in order to make sense of it and how and why those perceptions change and can be changed.

The paper deliberately raises issues of power, context and status which will be explored and applied to writing and the development of critical pedagogies around writing in higher education.

Frame

I examine how lecturers' perceptions emerge through their narratives or accounts and reveal their experiences of students' writing and developing students' writing. These narratives reflect my view that lecturers' and students' perceptions are part of a bigger discursive and contextualised whole. I am interested in how my participants' narrative or accounts are constructed and how they embody or reflect particular epistemological and political views of the world. The inherent breadth of tutor perceptions of students' writing and writing development, even in the single setting that I researched meant that my research design most closely resembles Yin's 'exploratory case study' model. I was

always prepared to accept contradictions and new emerging issues as they arose out of the process of my data collection. Using this exploratory model my aim was 'to discover theory by directly observing a social phenomenon in its 'raw' form" (Yin, 2003 p. 5). In this sense it is the depth or 'thickness' of the data, not the breadth that underpins this singular case study's claims to validity.

I am aware that using narrative for data collection is a contested and complex field and that there are many different descriptions and definitions that one could draw on (Chase, 2005). I treat the narratives collected from my participants as 'transcription uninterrupted by self-conscious intervention or reflection' However I recognise that using those transcripts in educational research will involve me as the researcher in what Atkinson(1990) called 'textual construction' meaning that the narrative I use will be changed by my use of them. I cannot avoid constructing them in my own image so to speak.

I take the view that individual lecturers' and students' perceptions about writing and writing development do not come out of a vacuum but are affected by the many wider discourses that they inhabit such as those determined by their discipline, the institution they work in and their own experiences and feelings about writing amongst other things.

Bourdieu talks of how regular social practices become invisible because they are 'obscured by the realities of ordinary sense-experience" (1984, p.22). In this paper I argue that the seeming transparency of the discourse around writing is a 'glass' through which lecturers peer 'darkly' trying hard to make out what they can actually see once they have actually taken a good look through it.

Research findings

The research described in the paper positions itself within a set of historical and epistemological frameworks that emphasise students' writing and writing development as an activity and set of practices that are socially situated. These include social theories of language, postmodern theories about society and a contemporary analysis of the changing shape of higher education. In the paper the central philosophical question or problem that I address is, how is power, personal and social, exercised through writing and writing development practices in higher education? I make an original contribution to knowledge to this question in a number of ways. I discuss how a situated view of students' writing helps to 'defamiliarise' and problematise assumptions and expectations around students writing and writing development. The data I have collected reveals how lecturers' accounts of how they perceive students writing and writing development reveals many inconsistencies and anxieties which have an effect on students' writing and writing development. It is clear from the interviews I have conducted so far that many lecturers see themselves as novice writing developers. This lack of confidence is often in contrast to the more secure identities they have as experts and teachers in their disciplinary field. I feel that the paper raises the interesting issue of how any notion of combining subject-specialist teaching with writing development may lead to tension and difficulties, not least with regard to lecturers' professional identities

Secondly through my exploration of existing theories about academic literacies, communities of practice and critical pedagogies I have started to deconstruct and problematise the 'discourse of transparency' (Lillis & Turner, 2001) that surrounds writing and writing development in higher education. I make the case that this higher education institutions need to proactively engage staff and students in a debate about the meaning and purposes of writing and writing development for academic purposes.

Lastly, the data I have gathered thus far suggested that there are many potential misunderstandings and discontinuities between lecturer and student expectations around writing for academic purposes which I feel warrant further investigation. These include the extent to which lecturers negotiate and recognise criticality around writing for their students and themselves; their reflectivity as writers and assessors of writing and an institutional commitment to radical and innovative praxis which requires the integration of theory and practice in students writing and writing development.