MAPPING THE CONCEPTUAL WORLD OF THE STUDENT WRITER

Colin Baskin
Cairns Campus , James Cook University
Colin.Baskin@jcu.edu.au

This paper is positioned within ongoing debates about the meaning and role of academic literacy in shaping and framing the academic and professional writing practices of student writers. It explores the relationships between literacy, individual writers and the academy, and points to the way that particular student groups describe academic writing practices, and in turn act upon their descriptions. The key to understanding what-counts-as-academic literacy is grounded in the social processes and practices that organise the 'everyday' world of the student. This world is explored initially through a content analysis of 175 student responses to 'what counts as good academic writing' and is confirmed using factor analysis. The emerging conceptual map represents an aggregated description of 'what-counts-as-good-academic-writing'. This description of good academic writing captures certain aspects of inter-subjectivity amongst student writers – its form, purpose and structure. Once embedded, this inter-subjectivity further enables student writers to collaborate in the construction of knowledge and practice relating to academic literacy. In mapping the conceptual world of the student writer, the paper offers a view of academic literacy as a socially constructed and

signifying space. It is within this institutional space that opportunities reside for students to assume ‘powerful’ and/or ‘less than powerful’ identities’ as writers and as members of the academic community.

Keywords: Academic Literacy; Discourse and Textual Studies.

What does good academic writing look like?

As the title of the paper suggests, I began writing with the broadest possible framework in mind. My initial focus was on whether academic writing has a discernible form, but in contemplating how to frame this inquiry I became much more concerned with the epistemology of 'locating' the paper and how to dignify and support its thesis. I became very aware of the accountability relations that govern academic writing and in doing so stumbled upon an interesting paradox: the subject of this paper is also its object. The same identity relations that frame my academic writing practices, apply equally to the student writers whose words and descriptions form the content of the paper.

As the abstract suggests, this paper is about the meaning and role of academic literacy in shaping student writing practices. It is also about the complex of literacy relationships, which are embedded in the everyday practices of the business faculty. The paper relies on student descriptions of good-academic-writing as a means of capturing and categorising data about what-counts-as-academic-literacy. Yet in many ways this story is as much about 'changing identities' as it is about 'changing practices'. In the university sector, subcultural differences are becoming more rather than less pronounced (Reid 1996; Postle, 1995). Differences of identity and affiliation are becoming more and more apparent in institutional measures and social markers related to gender, ethnicity, sexual preference, age and so on. The standards debate (Garcia, 1995; Jackson, 1995: HEC, 1992) points to these 'differences' as evidence of the decline and subversion of communication and

literacy standards in higher education. Add to this the recent phenomenon of 'on-line learning' and the established myth of 'collective audience and common culture' is dispelled once and for all (Kalantzis, 2000). Now more than ever before, the issue of 'identity' is particularly pertinent for the student writer. While the writer is able to shape the processes and contents of writing, the challenge of adapting to existing disciplinary and institutional conventions has far-reaching implications in terms of how the ‘social self' is defined, and how subsequent community orientations and relationships are formed. The assimilation strategies that characterise Higher Education institutions in Australia have in the past tended to ignore rather than recruit 'different' identities and affiliations.

Successful academic writing therefore comes down to questions of ‘who is who’ within the 'local' student text (Ivanic, 1997). What knowledge is attributed to an authoritative source, and what belongs to the student? How much impact does the reader have on determining the meaning of a text, and what leverage does the academic community bring to a writer's conceptualisation of writing? What basic strategies do students use in their texts to claim that they are members of this community, and how do these same student writers position the reader into attributing identities to them? These kinds of questions, in which versions of the self are implicated and enacted through the process of writing, are the focus of this discussion. By acknowledging the social processes that underlie academic writing, practitioners are better placed to explicate and interrogate academic writing as critical social practice.

Methodology

In asking 'what counts as academic writing' I provide a content analysis of 175 student responses to the open-ended question ‘what is good academic writing?’ By analysing student conceptions of ‘what-counts-as-good-academic-writing’, my aim is to identify convergent and divergent perspectives that work to establish shared knowledge about academic writing amongst student writers (Geertz, 1973). The assumption here is that the resultant ‘inter-subjectivity’ (shared understanding) is what defines the students’ conceptual world, and is therefore integral to how academic writing is constituted at a community level. This intersubjectivity also

frames and anchors assumptions about what the academically literate person may look like on paper. In short, I am asking to what degree, if at all, student-writers employ discernible aspects of language and/or genre to (co)construct knowledge about 'what-counts-as-good-academic-writing-practice'. Content analysis is used as a categorisation device, frequency analysis is used as a means of classification and factor analysis is employed to confirm data categorisation and classification processes.

Results: Student perceptions of academic writing

An important part of gathering data in a discourse community involves locating and collating "shared perspectives among its multiply connected individuals", what Geertz (1983:157) termed interpretive ethnography. Interpretive ethnography enables the mapping of community ideology through extended social engagement with a range of its informants. My 'extended engagement' with this writing community took place over four years. My study of its descriptions of literacy began with a content analysis of 175 written responses to the prompt "what-is-good-academic-writing?"

Initially 60 student responses were randomly examined in order to identify the categories used by students to describe good academic writing. This process of classification was carried out until no new categories emerged. In total, the pre-reading of the papers produced sixteen key word categories (Table 1.1 below). The list of categories derived from the initial reading was used by a second reader to analyse a further 50 randomly selected student responses from the remainder of the corpus. At this point no new categories were added, and consensus between readers as to the relevance of the classifications derived was reached. The entire corpus of student responses were read in detail by a third reader who completed the process of determining and recording descriptive categories and devising frequency tabulations (ie. yes/no attribute response). This analytical method identified key terms that "light up a whole way of looking at the world" of student writing (Geertz 1983:157). All 175 responses were analysed, and each variable named and categorised according to the key word classifications cited in Table 1.1. These classifications reflect both personal and institutional inflections on 'what-counts-as-

good-academic-writing'.

In Table 1.1, each categorical variable is listed (column 1), described (column 2) and presented with total mean frequency response (column 3). What-counts-as-good-academic-writing relates to the how academic writing is structured (M=0.83) and to the need for good academic writing to uphold an overriding sense of neutrality and detachment on the part of the author (M=0.82). Technical correctness is also a strong feature of good academic writing (M=0.53), as is the need to demonstrate a capacity to source knowledge relationships to existing (locally known) authorities (M=0.46) through the processes of referencing, knowledge networking and intertextuality.

Table 1.1 ***Linguistic Classifications – Categories of "Good Academic Writing"***		
Category	Descriptor	Mean %
Structural Correctness	Response that refers to aspects of structure - ie: polemic structure of introduction, body, conclusion, and paragraphical sequence.	.83
Author Neutrality	Responses that refers to authorial voice as impartial, non-committal and non-partisan.	.82
Technical Correctness	Response that refers to technical correctness - ie: grammar, word count, and spelling.	.53
Reader Orientation	A response with explicit reference to serving the reader's interest in contrast to just writing for writing's sake.	.46
Acknowledges Authority	Response that indicates the importance of inter-textual references, authorship, knowledge networking.	.46
Clarity and Economy	A response that placed particular emphasis on aspects of clarity, conciseness, and word economy.	.45
Analytical Purpose	A response that placed particular emphasis on aspects of argument - features analysis, comparison, dissection.	.43
Relies on Evidence	Response features evidence/empirical data as a core requirement. Features include logic, rational deduction, and/or hypothesising.	.43
Stylistic Aspects	Response with reference to any particular type of writing - ie: formal/informal, report, essay, position paper.	.39

Internal Cohesion	A response that places particular stress on the importance of internal links and cohesion as evidence of good academic writing. Stresses interrelationships between concepts and contexts.	.37
Informs the reader	Response that makes explicit provision that academic writing is essentially informative.	.29
Communicates Effectively	Response stresses the importance of functional communication - is functional, carries a point of view, achieves a social purpose.	.19
Teleological	Response focuses on academic writing as a self-journey - a progression from a metaphorical point A to a point B.	.11
Honesty	Responses that focus primarily on the need for intellectual honesty - ie: plagiarism, authenticity.	.10
Biographical	A response that locates the academic writing process as an extension of the self - a view that personal experience is relevant.	.04
Originality	A response that places emphasis on simple originality - ie: students as contributors to tribal knowledge-making practices.	.03

Table 1.1 - Mean Frequencies for Key Category Variables for students' response to 'What is good academic writing?'

A strong reader orientation (M=0.46) indicates that student writers place a significant weighting on the needs of the reader in constructing their written response. Similarly, they favour an analytical mode (M=0.43) of writing with a heavy reliance on empirical evidence (M=0.43) to sustain and build an argumentative presence or position. The low frequency of categories such as biographical reference (M=.05), originality (M=.03), teleology (M=.11) and honesty (M=.10) suggests that good academic writing is more impersonal than personal in nature, more positivist than constructivist in orientation, and places a much higher emphasis on conformity and assimilation than it does on self-representation.

Confirming the frequency solution: Dimension reduction using factor analysis

A ***principal components factor analysis*** with varimax rotation was performed using the sixteen items presented in Table 1.1 as categories of student description related to 'what-counts-as-good-academic-writing'. Six factors, with ***eigenvalues*** greater than one were extracted using SPSS, accounting for 53% of the total variance for the

sixteen items (Table 1.2 above) Because all ***eigenvalues*** in Table 1.2 are greater than one, all six factors can be taken to represent substantial dimensions in defining "what-counts-as-good-academic-writing".

The factor analysis is useful in confirming the frequency figures (Table 1.1). Factor one (***self-representation)*** is evidenced by close relationships between the subjective categories of academic writing - teleological, biographical, honesty and originality. Given the low frequency of each of these variables (Table 1.1) the relative strength of the factor suggests that academic writing is seen by perhaps a handful of students as an act of 'self-representation'. The factor analysis also identifies and confirms the formative influence of institutional or academic conventions in what has been labelled 'rhetorical structure' (factor 2) which charts how categories of structure, evidence, internal cohesion and analysis constitute student conceptions of 'good academic writing'. Higher frequency ratings on each of these categories indicate that rhetorical structure is an underlying factor in a majority view of what constitutes 'good-academic-writing'.

High positive factor loadings (Table 1.2) on matters of technical correctness, acknowledging authority and honesty give rise to a form of disciplinary writing that is perceived by students to meet ***'existing writing conventions'*** (factor 3). High frequency ratings on each of these categories indicate that 'good academic writing' is traceable to existing and established technical and referencing practices and standards. Taken together, the categories of self-representation, rhetorical structure and conventionality (factors 1, 2 and 3) account for 30% of variance across student descriptions of 'good academic writing'.

'***Aspects of argumentation'*** (factor 4) related to 'good-academic-writing' features positive loadings for author neutrality, information processing and analytical style. Good academic writing is therefore guided by a 'net-to-gross' logic that sees it argumentatively framed, objective, analytical and pseudo-scientific. A '***Readership***

Focus' (factor 5) confirms that 'good academic writing' is relevant to the reading community, and that 'good' writing in an academic context conforms to common aspects of style, and patterns of analysis. The readership focus described here is largely an instrumental one. 'What-counts-as-good-academic-writing' also tends to be '***form driven'*** (factor 6). Positive loadings on markers related to technical correctness and internal cohesion characterise 'good-academic-writing' as functionally and specifically oriented. The form of 'good writing' presented by students' correlates closely to academic assessment practices, as most of the 'academic writing' in which students engage is illuminated by assessment procedures. Hence academic writing tasks are likely to vary according to purpose and disciplinary conventions, while retaining common structural aspects. In this way, the results presented in Table 1.2 indicate that 'what-counts-as-good-academic-writing' is in part contingent upon 'instrumental' notions of form (factor 6).

Relevant Category Items ***Eigenvalues*** ***% of Variance Explained***	***Factor 1*** 2.01 12.55	***Factor 2*** 1.40 8.72	***Factor 3*** 1.33 8.28	***Factor 4*** 1.27 7.94	***Factor 5*** 1.20 7.52	***Factor 6*** 1.18 7.35
Self Representation						
Biographical	**.79**.					
Teleological	.74					
Originality	.64					
Honesty	.47					
Rhetorical Structure						
Structural Correctness		**.64**				
Relies on Evidence		.57				
Internal Cohesion		.44				

Analytical Purpose	.42				
Observes Convention					
Technical Correctness		**.68**			
Acknowledges Authority		.51			
Honesty		.49			
Argumentation					
Author Neutrality			**.55**		
Informs the Reader			.51		
Analytical Purpose			.46		
Clarity & Economy			.40		
Reader Focus					
Stylistic Aspects				**.55**	
Reader Orientated				.48	
Communicates Effectively				.47	
Form Driven					
Internal Cohesion					**.49**
Technical Conventions					.42

Table 1.2: Factor Loadings - What-counts-as-good-academic-writing

Items in bold are the marker items for each scale

Taken together, the six factors underlying 'good academic writing' (Table 1.2) point to the existence of an established community discourse, and identifies a common view on what constitutes ‘good academic writing’. This data also confirms the following relationship in terms of knowledge about academic literacy.

AI = f (Sr, Rs, Oc, Ar, Rf, Fd)

where: ***Academic Literacy***(Al) is a function of (f) ***self-representation*** on the part of the writer (Sr); the ***rhetorical structure*** of text (Rs); the writer's acknowledgment of ***academic convention*** (Oc); a tendency ***to linear and conclusive development of argument*** (Ar); a ***reader orientation*** and focus (Rf) and a ***correlation to existing academic writing forms*** (Fd). This equation posits a complex relationship between the features of literate products and the academic writers who produce them. Around this construct contesting notions of literacy reside; contradictions and continuities characterise literacy as a socially organising force within the academy (Graff, 1986).

Points of Convergence: Continuities in Academic Literacy.

In the following excerpts, each respondent is identified by a numbered response. Each excerpt has been chosen from the corpus of data to illustrate the dynamic of the factor analysis (Table 1.2). The elevation of 'evidence' over 'experience' is captured in the following student' responses. Here, the literacy of the non-specialist (student) is constructed more through social-organisational relations, than it is the product of individual attributes. The individual is effectively silenced (for the most part) through the practice of institutional literacy, and the institutional voice alone is the product of articulation. The notion of a form-driven, and functional (means-ends), literacy is reflected in respondent accounts.

> An academic piece has the sole purpose of arriving at a pre-defined position. (45)

> Good academic writing is unemotional, contains relevant and strong evidence and communicates in a clear, set and structured way. (154)

> A proper and appropriate position must be taken when forming a piece of writing. (104)

The concept of silence is both applicable and relevant here. Making 'the personal' irrelevant to the production of academic literacy increases the reliance and dependence of student writers on hegemonic writing conventions.

> Good academic writing means telling the marker what they want to hear. A form of prostitution really…(9)

> I understand good academic writing needs to focus on facts. These are always objective and cannot involve any opinion or personal voice. (67)

Striking the ‘right balance’ in relation to academic literacy is about displaying in an authentic way, a sense of writing competence over a range of literacy events. This involves stepping ‘inside’ the discipline, which is first and foremost an impersonal act, but one that must eventually become personal.

> Good academic writing must be supported by references to give credence to the ideas presented, but also must have some independent opinion or conclusion that reflects the writers viewpoint from their reading or life-experiences. (134)

Yet this progression to a comfort zone within the discipline (Bartholomae, 1985) is a mediated process for the student writer. Structural and rhetorical modelling is an overriding feature of 'good-academic-writing'.

> Academic writing needs to be a factual piece of writing with supporting evidence and link words between information and paragraphs. The word limits must be adhered to and the introduction, body and conclusion should be in line with these limits and not exceed them by more than 10% of the total word limit allowed. (25)

> Good academic writing should be logically set out
>
> - An intro/body/conclusion
>
> - Linked paragraphs completing the circle from intro to conclusion
>
> - Each paragraph backed by evidence. (1)

Each composite part of the paper serves a concise function in the overall (re) production of text. Students often devise rules for individual and strategic sentences, forming part of the linear journey from abstraction to concrete outcomes.

> The introduction should clearly state what you are trying to achieve in your essay. It should include the question in your first sentence and have your four main points outlined. An argument should also be included in your introduction. (64)

> The conclusion or finishing piece of academic writing reiterates the introduction and does not add any new information. (9)

> > At the beginning of an essay, the author may introduce the reader to a fairly abstract idea in order to engage his attention. As the introduction moves on in concise points, the level of abstraction breaks down. (173)

A common theme was one of recipe writing - ***tell them what you will tell them in the introduction, tell them in the body, and tell them what you told them in the conclusion*** (34, 38, 39). This was referred to by some students as a "***formula"*** (100, 93) and by others as the "way" (106, 113).

> Good academic writing is about clearly communicating to your intended audience. They expect to read things in a certain way. (102)

> It is a crucial factor with good academic writing to be aware of who the target audience is. You need to make it easy for them to read. (113)

What emerges from the tapestry of student accounts offered here is awareness that 'what-counts-as-good-academic-writing', ***'always already'*** exists in the host

community. Poynton (1990:251) suggests that the theoretical and discursive considerations of good academic writing are traceable to a complex of:

> "(1) Culturally learned forms of interaction, (2) structures of knowledge formed by the habitual forms of representation available to and used by the individual … (3) structures of feeling about those structures of knowledge and interaction."

Conclusion: What about Identity?

The data presented here confirms that culturally learned forms of interaction give rise to academic writing practices in this particular writing community. What also emerges from this analysis is a quantitative 'snapshot' of the structures and forms of knowledge underpinning 'what-counts-as-good-academic-writing' at the community level. Qualitative data presented here confirms that structures of feeling, belief and compulsion **{AI = f (Sr, Rs, Oc, Ar, Rf, Fd)}** drive student conceptions of what 'good writing' should be. What-counts-as-good-academic-writing in this community is 'functional' and 'process driven'. Just as this acts as a means of affirmation for some students, for others it works as a far more problematic ordering device.

> Good academic writing? - as you can tell from the previous question I have not received it and I'm sure that other people haven't either. (67)

> Good academic writing - Unfortunately I find it very difficult to put into practice, especially if it comes to topics I don't know anything about. (126)

> Academic writing is an activity, which many people do not like - including myself. (169)

> I understand good academic writing to be something that I just can't do. (175)

The community under study is therefore both ‘divided’ and ‘together’ in its conceptions of 'good-writing-practice'. Good academic writing has a discernible ‘form’, yet this from cannot be easily acquired by all student writers. While often viewed as an objective attribute of the academic person or community, 'good-academic-writing' is primarily and simultaneously an individual subjective and inter-subjective experience. What the student achieves through the process of academic literacy is essentially candidate membership; what the disciplinary community achieves on the other hand is a reaffirmation of its mission, and at a basic level, a constant re-inscribing of its encoded symbols. This ‘mutually reinforcing’ network of 'social understandings' constitutes the particular shared-reality that is ‘good-academic-writing’ within this local community of writers. This shared reality, and the inevitable tensions that surround ‘good academic writing’ as a social construction, do little however to rebut the long-standing presumption of difference.

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