

DEVELOPING ACADEMIC LITERACY: A DISCIPLINE-BASED APPROACH

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Introduction

With current moves to widen participation, a more diverse student body is entering higher education. In this context, a key challenge is assisting learners to develop academic literacy, so as to enable their deeper engagement with university study. This entails making transparent to students the knowledge-making and communicative practices of the subject area, hence the discipline-based approach to developing academic literacy advocated here.

Such an approach is illustrated with reference to a first-year, core module in History, offered at London Metropolitan University ^[1]. It is a 'theory and method' module which aims to introduce students to the discipline, and to enhance their academic literacy by embedding requisite 'skills' in the teaching and learning of the subject. In terms of content, the main themes of the module are the nature of History, constructing History and the uses of History. It has to cater for a diverse group of students.

Disciplinary Nature of Academic Literacy

Academic literacy may be defined as the complex of linguistic, conceptual and skills resources for analysing, constructing and communicating knowledge in the subject area. Learning in higher education involves engagement with new and different ways of knowing and writing, values and beliefs. Hence, students need to become familiar with the specialist concepts, theories, methods, rules and writing conventions of specific disciplines or fields of study (Ballard & Clanchy, 1988; Flower, 1990; Gee, 1990; Lea & Street, 1998). *Epistemic cognition* – i.e. understanding how subject knowledge is created and challenged ^[2] – is thus crucial for accessing academic texts and tasks. The History core module introduces such epistemic knowledge as a means for developing students' critical thinking, reading and writing in the discipline.

The importance of addressing epistemology as an aspect of academic literacy development is highlighted by studies of student writing. Hounsell (1987) found that some students conceive of essay-writing as being an *arrangement* of facts and ideas, while others recognise it as a matter of presenting a cogent *argument* (as demanded in academic work). He suggested that these different notions may be connected, respectively, to surface and deep approaches to study - a hypothesis confirmed by Prosser and Webb (1994).

The question is how to shift students' conceptions. As Hounsell (1987: 118) proposes, 'attempts to improve the quality of students' essays (and perhaps also their broader mastery of their chosen discipline) must spring from and turn upon dialogue about the nature of academic discourse'. In their study of curriculum practice in two arts and two science departments, Sheppard and Gilbert (1991) concluded that meaningful learning can be promoted where the history, philosophy, paradigms and methods of the discipline are explored, and teaching engages with students' existing views of knowledge.

From their interviews with students and tutors, Lea and Street (1998) established that many of the difficulties experienced by students arose from conflicting requirements for writing in different subjects, requirements that were frequently left implicit. Although students were often supplied with general guidelines on writing techniques, they struggled to apply these at the level of writing a particular text in a specific disciplinary context. Feedback on students' work was another problematic area. Tutors frequently use generic categories (such as 'structure' or 'argument') which carry implicit disciplinary (epistemological) meanings. Consequently, feedback tends to be elusive to students - especially where there is a wide gap between students' and tutors' conceptions of writing - and more likely to exclude and disadvantage (non-traditional) students who do not enter with 'essayist literacy' acquired through formal education (Lillis, 2001). While some students are thus able to benefit from tutor advice, many learn to write academically the hard and painful way through a process of 'trial and error' in which they often feel daunted by the perceived inequality in knowledge, status and power between teachers and learners (Read et al, 2000).

Strategies for Enhancing Students' Academic Literacy

In order to promote academic literacy development, the History module combines discipline-specific input with general guidelines and feedback on essay planning and writing, and regular opportunities for active learning and participation.

Task-oriented seminars: In weekly seminars which build on preceding lectures, the students work on tasks whose purpose is to explore epistemological issues through concrete examples. These tasks mainly involve analysis and discussion of extracts from secondary sources which illuminate issues in the practice of History. For instance, the problem of explanation in historical writing was explored by looking at the ('intentionalist' *versus* 'structuralist') debate over the origins of the Holocaust; the influence of theory on historical interpretations was examined using short accounts representative of 'History from Below' (such as the role of the crowd in the French Revolution), women's history and postcolonialism; and the use and abuse of historical knowledge was illustrated through the representation of empire and colonised peoples in history textbooks used in schools during the height of imperialism.

Small-group project: A further opportunity to investigate key issues in more depth, and for active, collaborative learning, is offered in the coursework project. It comprises a small-group presentation (about 5 per group), in which students are required to elaborate and debate on an aspect of historical practice (e.g. E.H. Carr's famous dictum that History is a 'dialogue between the present and the past'). Students also have to produce a reflective report (individual) on the presentation, making comments on insights they have gained about the nature of History.

Essay-writing workshop: To give disciplinary substance to the challenge of essay-writing, a lecture and seminar session is devoted to a workshop which involves students in a close analysis of a short exemplar of academic writing, to model argument construction in the subject. Frameworks for devising an essay plan are also presented, and guidelines on referencing and ways to avoid plagiarism. In addition, students were invited to prepare one-page essay plans for subsequent discussion with the tutors on an individual basis, prior to producing their final answers. This provides one kind of opportunity for talking about academic writing, for clarifying expectations and meanings, that Lillis (2001) advocates as helpful to students trying to find their academic voices. It could also exemplify the notion of 'feeding forward' into assessment tasks, rather than just 'feeding back', as argued for by Higgins *et al* (2001: 274).

Essay assessment sheet: In order to provide students with clear expectations and detailed formative feedback on the form and content of their essays, an assessment sheet containing explicit criteria (see appendix I) is used. Additional verbal feedback is also given where students take up the offer to come and see the tutor.

Evaluation of Teaching and Learning

An evaluation of the module was conducted in the academic year 2001/02 employing a student feedback questionnaire and an analysis of written work (essays and project reports) in terms of specific learning outcomes. Judging from the students' ratings on the evaluation questionnaire, there was considerable agreement among respondents that the module had helped them to achieve the main learning outcomes, as shown in the following table:

LEARNING OUTCOMES: students should be able to...	RATINGS*
Understand why history and historians are subjects of debate	64% + 27% = 91%
Consider issues of objectivity, bias, ideology [etc]	27% + 64% = 91%
Understand historical categories e.g. nation, class, gender, race	27% + 56% = 83%
Develop skills of debate and communication, oral and written	27% + 64% = 91%
Appreciate what historical awareness and explanation entails	45% + 36% = 81%

* percentage of respondents who selected the top two ratings on a 5-point scale

There were also highly positive comments on the seminar programme (including the essay workshop and the learning materials). Students noted seminars had been very helpful for clarifying issues raised in lectures, as well as enjoyable, thought-provoking and conducive to their participation.

Corroborating evidence of success in enhancing students' understanding of the nature of the discipline was found in their project reports, where they identified new insights into the subject. Half or more students mentioned they had gained awareness of the interrelationship of present and past, the bias of both historians and sources, changing or differing interpretations of the past, and the importance of viewing historical events in context. The analysis of student work revealed that among the sample group (at least) the majority of students produced competently argued and capably expressed essays that reflected a good understanding of the discipline.

Conclusion

This case study has sought to illustrate possible methods, and benefits for learners, of integrating the development of students' academic literacy into subject-based teaching and learning. The evaluation of the History module in question suggests that explicitly developing students' epistemic knowledge can enhance their ability to read and write in the discipline, as argued above on the grounds of educational theory and research into student learning. The challenge for lecturers may be summarised in the concept of the 'scholar-teacher' who 'knows, from the position of inhabiting some discipline or field of knowledge itself, what it means to make *this* knowledge... intelligible, organised, structured and available to learners to grapple with and to appropriate for themselves' (Andresen, 2000: 146).

NOTES

[1] A full version of this paper is due to be published in 2003 in *Research and Innovation in Learning and Teaching* [ISSN 1468-0912].

[2] As Craig (1989: 169) explains, epistemic cognition entails understanding the ways, criteria and limits of knowing of different disciplines. Perkins (1992: 85) defines it as 'know-how concerning justification and explanation in the subject matter', but what he terms 'inquiry' knowledge (about the way results are challenged and new knowledge is created in the discipline) is arguably also integral to epistemic cognition.

APPENDIX I: ESSAY ASSESSMENT SHEET

London Metropolitan University
HR125 : Uses of History

CRITERIA	RATINGS*				
	5	4	3	2	1
Content <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ relevant ideas & facts/examples ▪ key issues covered ▪ adequate reading (of recommended & other sources) ▪ creative & critical thought 					
Structure <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ introduction: clear amplication of question ▪ paragraphs: coherent (one main idea), connected, logical order ▪ conclusion: effective summary of key issues/overall argument 					
Expression <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ points clearly expressed ▪ appropriate use of academic language & concepts ▪ accurate spelling, grammar and punctuation ▪ fluent, succinct style 					
Presentation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ layout: neat and legible, sensible formatting ▪ referencing: adequate acknowledgement of sources, consistent use of citation method ▪ bibliography: list of sources consulted complete and correctly set out 					

GENERAL COMMENTS

* 5= excellent to 1= poor

MARK:

TUTOR:

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Biographical note

Formerly a lecturer in History, Digby Warren has been working in the field of higher education development for 12 years, previously in South Africa (University of Cape Town) and in the UK since January 2001 (London Metropolitan University). His chief area of expertise is curriculum development and associated teaching and learning development, about which he has produced numerous conference and briefing papers and a dozen published articles. [email: d.warren@londonmet.ac.uk]