



# A Date With Academic Literacies: Using Brief Conversation to Facilitate Student Engagement With Academic Literacies

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The argument that de-contextualized deficit approaches to academic literacies were ineffective (Lea, 2004; Northedge, 2003), has led to expectations that New Zealand Higher Education institutions embed academic literacies within programmes and courses (Tertiary Education Commission, 2010). This paper reports on the use of a teaching and learning strategy called OSSS (One-Stop Skills Shop) as the first step in the embedding process within the Department of Computing at an Institute of Technology in New Zealand Aotearoa. The analysis of qualitative data on the lived-experiences of students and academic staff as participants in the OSSS highlights the value of approaching academic literacies from a dialogic viewpoint. In this instance, dialogic approaches regard academic literacies as more than the learning of technical study skills. From a dialogic perspective, academic literacies also involve ways of being and knowing through acts of participation and communication. A number of key themes emerged from analysis of the data show a correspondence with literature on the first-year experience and discourses of transition in relation to concerns regarding retention and success as students' transition into higher education.

*Keywords:* academic literacies, dialogic, first year experience

## Introduction

Interest in academic literacies has been evident in tertiary education since the shift towards the provision of mass education resulted in diversification of the student demographic. Despite this ongoing attention, working definitions and responses to academic literacies have remained diverse. An example of this diversity in conceptual understanding is evident within the multiple case study findings of New Zealand Tertiary providers, in which the meaning of literacies was differ from tertiary organizations (Leach, Zepke, Haworth, Massey University, & Isaacs, 2010).

In the process of defining academic literacies, students are typically identified as the locus of the "problem" (Cottrell, 2001). Such deficit discourses placed emphasis on the acquisition of skills related to academic rules and conventions, and often resulted in study skills based on interventions, aimed at disadvantaged students. Alternative definitions emphasize that knowledge is socially constructed and context-related. Even these social process approaches, which described the learner as a co-constructor of meaning, placed the learner in a peripheral position within the discourse as apprentice but not as a central participant (Northedge, 2003). The calls for embedded academic literacies interventions by situating them within the subject discipline were still operated from the perspective of the learner as a single focus of inquiry (Wingate, 2006).

Through attention to classroom experience, the dual roles that both as the teacher and the learner occupied in academic literacies are raised. As emphasized by Levy, Yellowley, and Farmer (2006): “What goes on in the classroom is pivotal to developing student engagement in the learning process” (p. 4). Redefining academic literacies as a dual developmental process extended responsibility, and multiplied the focus for inquiry into more effectively engaging students in the tertiary teaching and learning experience. This paper presents an experience where a dialogic approach to academic literacies was taken to facilitate an understanding of academic literacies as more than a set of technical study skills. The event, called the OSSS (One-Stop Skills Shop), will be situated within its contextual frame of reference and described in detail. The themes that emerged from formal evaluation of the event will be discussed in relation to literature, and implications for future practice.

### **Conceptual Framework of Academic Literacies**

The conceptual framework used to inform the teaching and learning event not only acknowledged the technical aspects of academic literacies, but also sought to emphasize the place of discourse and acts of participation inherent within academic literacies. The three central elements of academic literacies identified as: discourse, participation, and skills. The concept of discourse informed by Foucaultian theory as ways of thinking and producing meaning, involved knowledge, social practices, and power relations (Foucault, 2002). The value of using the notion of discourse as informed by Foucault was that significance can be given to the acts of participation intrinsic to learning and literacy. Participation varied in degrees, with movement from the outer edges to the centre of the learning environment which was facilitated through the enhancement of competency in the required discourses and associated with literacy practices (Wenger, 2002).

The elements of academic literacies are regarded as connected to core experiences of student identity, voice, position, and power. These core experiences exist in relation to student participation and discipline discourses. Gee (2008), in his description of “Biker Bars and Yuppie Drinkers” portrayed the challenges faced when entering new discourses as being on the level of saying and doing:

It is not just what you say or even just how you say it. It is also what you are and do while you say it. It is not enough just to say the right ‘lines’ one needs to get the whole ‘role’ right”. (Gee, 2008, p. xv)

In this way, Gee (2008) acknowledged that whilst the technical literacy skills of “knowing how to speak and act” (p. xv) are important, they do not exist in isolation, and should not be removed from the context in which discourse and participation occurs. The contextual features of the discourse relate to the calls for a shift away from de-contextualized, axiomatic approaches to academic literacies (Wingate, 2006).

### **Event Description and Context**

The team within the Department of Computing expressed a desire to develop their courses, to enhance students’ engagement and success, and progression into higher-levels of academic study. Students within the Certificate Level 4 programme are predominately male. There is a high level of diversity in terms of cultural background within the student cohorts. Whilst the majority of students are recent school leavers, there are a minority of students returning to education after many years. Prior educational experiences of students do not all appear to be positive, with a lack of engagement and completion being an issue for the programme. This has led to a number of course developments, including commitment towards the embedding of academic literacies.

As part of the embedding process, attention was given to the identification of academic literacies issues pertinent to the Certificate in Information Technology. Rather than solely concentrating on textual literacies, attention was also given to requirements and expectations in terms of student participation, teaching and learning events, which enabled students to be able to access a range of learning support services provided within the institution. In this way, attention was given to all three elements of academic literacies: technical skills, discourse, and participation. The OSSS was only one aspect of the embedding process with further features running throughout the duration of the programme of study.

The OSSS was timetabled into the orientation process during the students' first week of study. The event consisted of a series of booths providing information on aspects of academic literacies pertinent to the New Zealand Qualifications Authority Level-4 Certificate in Information Technology, within the Department of Computing. Students were divided in small groups with their peers. The group moved from one information booth to another at 5-minute intervals, signaled by the ringing of a bell. The process continued until all student groups had visited each information booth.

The focus of the information booths covered aspects of teaching and learning that students could expect to experience during their tertiary study, which included: (1) asking questions and having academic conversations; (2) collaborative learning; (3) writing samples; (4) understanding academic assessments; (5) group work; and (6) academic terminology.

There were also booths informing students of the range of support services available for them to access within the institution, including: (1) Pacific student support centre; (2) Maori student support centre; (3) information literacy via the library services; and (4) the learning centre.

An attempt was made to vary the ways, in which students engaged with the information provided at each booth. The games, such as matching activities, case studies, and even iPads, were used to encourage participation and instigate conversation, both between academic staff and students, and also among the student peer groups. This dialogue was central to the aim of the event, with engaging in meaningful, albeit brief conversation is used to act as a springboard for later, more in-depth conversations about academic literacy throughout the duration of the programme. At the end of the event, evaluation forms were distributed to both students and facilitators to gather feedback in terms of interest, value, and impact on learning, as well as how the event could be improved.

### **Event Data**

The evaluation of the event sought to gather data about the meaning of the experience from a lived experience perspective, in keeping with phenomenological epistemologies (Ladkin, 2005). An open-ended and anonymous self-completion questionnaire was used. In keeping with the dialogic position, the perspectives of both students and academic staff were sought, as to have one voice without the other would have only given half of the story, and hence, a limited understanding of the OSSS is considered as a lived experience. In all, 64 students and 10 academic staff participated in the event with a response rate of 90% to the evaluation.

### **Findings**

Thematic analysis of the data revealed that the overall perception of the event was that it had been a beneficial experience for both students and academic staff. Themes emerging from the data were related to the preparation for learning, relationships, learning approaches, possible selves, autonomy, and agency. Each theme

related to relevant literature on students' experiences and academic literacies will be discussed in turn.

### **Preparation for Learning**

An overwhelming positive response from students was their sense that the OSSS event had prepared them for their upcoming learning experience. This preparation for learning focused on aspects of organization, especially time management, knowing how they would be assessed, and within this, the various forms assessment might take. Skills for learning were also identified as being supported, including writing, asking questions, and developing study groups. Another common feature in the student evaluation was the acknowledgment of the wide range of resources available within the institution to support students learning. This knowledge had been reinforced through the OSSS and met people from these services in person, which relates well to the theme of relationships identified within the evaluation data.

### **Relationships**

The significance of relationships emerged clearly from responses of both students and academic staff. Feedback identified that during these brief encounters, within the OSSS, students felt that they were actually listened to and their ideas were valued, which enhanced a sense of "meaningful participation" (Solomonides & Reid, 2009). Through the conversation process, relationships were seen as "being forged", which enabled students to feel that their personal success was valued, and that the academic staffs were there to help them succeed. The ability to give individual attention to students was reported as enabling staff to become more personally involved in student learning, enhancing channels of communication. The perspective of staff was balanced with student reports that due to the OSSS, they felt more likely to ask for help with their learning.

### **Learning Approaches**

Students gained a sense that learning can happen in many ways, through the use of varied methods for engaging students within the information booths. Students positively commented on the use of group work and interactive activities, including iPads. Learning approaches were enhanced through the encouragement to talk to tutors and peers. Through the use of conversation, students reported that the OSSS experience had encouraged them to ask more questions and develop an open mind, and that they came to see that "knowledge could be fun". Learning approaches were related to the qualities and dispositions students brought to their learning. This is particularly the case when, within this specific institutional context, the tertiary curriculum is built around the concepts of participation, inquiry, social-constructivism, and learner autonomy. Learning approaches were related to and enhanced learning disposition of adaptability, flexibility, and self-reliance, all identified as necessary for social participation in current society (Barnett, 2004).

### **Possible Selves**

The sense of learning potential communicated through student responses in relation to learning approaches was also evidenced in claims that the OSSS enabled them to reconceptualize their own futures. One student talked about how it was possible to see the current programme as a stepping-stone to higher qualifications, rather than as an end in itself as initially considered. Given that this event took place within the orientation week, the confidence boost provided a positive start to the students' learning journey. Students had already begun to predict, or foresee their own success in the academic environment (Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006). The confidence was related to the benefit of having an opportunity to talk to lecturers and listened to.

### **Autonomy**

According to the academic staff, the information booths facilitated learner autonomy through rising students' meta-learning, which is said "to refer to students' awareness of their learning and control over their strategy selection and deployment" (Graham & Phelps, 2003, p. 5). Students identified how their perceptions of tertiary learning environment differed from that of school through being encouraged to ask questions and engage in conversation with teachers, and the value that is attributed to student's thoughts and ideas. These experiences were regarded as contributing towards a positive start to their tertiary study experience, boosting students' self-confidence in terms of expressing themselves with peers and teachers, overcoming the vulnerability associated with asking questions in class and through an increasing awareness of the contextual processes of the institution. Increasing awareness was reciprocated for academic staff through gaining insight into learners as individuals and group participants. Learners discussed how interesting it was that issues of power and responsibility were raised within the information booths the power was a significant feature within the discourses of academic literacies (Lea & Street, 1998). Meta-learning facilitated students' sense of autonomy and self-control over their learning which also was related to the concept of agency.

### **Agency**

The concept of "agency" refers to students' activity that promotes effective learning. Agency can be shown through acts of motivation, self-determination, and will. According to Barnett (2007), agency in the form of "will" was paramount to educational success: "The will is the foundation of educational energy. It brings a sense of the future and a purpose in that time horizon" (Barnett, 2007, p. 20). According to the students, the OSSS reinforced agency within learning through enabling students to open themselves up to changing the way they approach their learning. Through the OSSS, students reported that they felt more personal responsibility and ownership towards their learning. Personal responsibility was reported in terms of time management and determination, and it was engaged in more active approaches for seeking help with learning. Personal involvement in learning was also related to skill development in relation to academic writing, approaching assessment tasks, and the use of resources to support knowledge construction and understanding. The value of the OSSS in terms of agency was related well to the ideas of Rodriguez (2009) who, in a study of the academic identity of Business students, argued that, "Educators should make learners aware of their conceptions of learning and the personal engagement required by the learning material" (p. 521), which took meta-learning from an inner focus into the realm of "self, in relation to". In this instance, self was in relation to academic practices.

### **Event Limitations**

Whilst overall feedback endorsed the event, it is acknowledged that it is not without its limitations. The most challenging feature of the event was the opportunity to have so many academic staff available at one time to facilitate the booths. This is particularly pertinent, given the number of part-time staff, who may well not be paid for such events outside of their timetabled teaching.

A further challenge was able to position the event, so that it occurred early when students were just getting to grips in a new learning environment. The importance of holding the event as the start of the learning experience was related to concerns regarding student engagement typically shown through lack of attendance. Through providing staff and students with an opportunity to meet each other face to face, it was hoped that the strength of these encounters would enable students to engage in their study and sustain that engagement.

Academic literacies were not regarded as resulting from a short term fix, and a developmental perspective of academic literacies was supported by Boughey (2000) as discussed: “The academic literacy should be a starting point for a university career is erroneous. Rather, they claim, the development of academic literacy should be viewed as the goal or endpoint of a degree course” (p. 281). A challenge to the teaching teams will ensure that the embedding of academic literacies continues to build on the experiences provided during the event.

### **Discussion**

A significant feature of the OSSS was that information was contextualized within the discipline and the programme of study. The event was designed to initiate conversation, thinking, and enquiry by giving students a snapshot of information about academic literacies for the tertiary study. By acting as a prompt at the beginning of the formal learning process for students on the programme, this “snapshot” of academic literacies needs to be reinforced throughout the programme of study in order to have a sustained effect on learning. The OSSS facilitated the process of teaching with academic literacies by making it more obvious to students what these literacies are and how participation would occur, which are related to the arguments of Boughey (2011):

“Academic literacy” involves knowing how to speak and act in academic discourses. Literacy is not something which (sic) can be overtly taught in a convenient introductory series of lectures. People become literate by observing and interacting with other members of the discourse until the ways of speaking, acting, thinking, feeling and valuing common to that discourse become natural to them. (p. 281)

To obtain the most benefit from the OSSS experience, students and teachers need to continue to engage with academic literacies in a transparent manner, and need to be open about the teaching and learning of academic literacies through programme delivery. Transparency means that academic literacies are actively taught within the contextualization of discipline discourses, rather than as an outside activity. So, it becomes a situation of teaching “with” academic literacies rather than teaching “about” academic literacies.

Teaching “with” academic literacies reinforces the concept of becoming academically literate as a situated developmental process. Academic literacies are seen as being situated epistemologically and subjectively. Epistemologically, regarding where discipline knowledge comes from, how the value and worth of information is decided and how information is conveyed, this information may take many forms including action, or practices. Subjectively academic literacies are situated in relationships, dialogue with knowledge, people, place, and time. Becoming academically literate means to be able to become active participants in the wider world (Jarvis, 1996), which as it was argued, is the core argument to the significance for enabling students to engage with/in academic literacies.

### **Concluding Comments**

This paper has sought to outline an event designed to introduce students to aspects of academic literacies on a New Zealand Qualifications Authority Level-4 Certificate in Information Technology. The event embraced an inclusive approach to academic literacies. Rather than identifying only those students who “could not” engage with academic practices, the event aimed to reach all students in the belief that the experience itself would benefit all learners through the opportunity to interact with peers and get to meet academic teaching and support staff. Teaching “with” academic literacies also opens up the understanding of what academic literacies are and enables closer critique of what it means to be a teacher within a post compulsory tertiary context.

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