

CHAPTER 1

A FRAMEWORK FOR USABLE PEDAGOGY: CASE STUDIES TOWARDS ACCESSIBILITY, CRITICALITY AND VISIBILITY

Julio Gimenez and Peter Thomas

This chapter presents case studies of pedagogical applications of an academic literacies approach to the development of academic reading and writing. They were designed for degree programmes at a London university within the context of UK policies of widening participation.¹ In most widening participation contexts the student profile is varied in terms of, *inter alia*, relationship with English,² previous educational experiences, and length of time away from formal education. These elements of the student profile have a direct bearing on academic achievement, so we argue that academic literacies practices in contexts like that described in this chapter must take account of this variety and provide students with a balance between language learning, language development and literacy enhancement.

The two case studies here represent attempts to develop what we call a “usable pedagogy” informed by, and complementing, theoretical considerations of academic literacy (e.g., David Barton, Mary Hamilton, & Roz Ivanič, 2000; Mary Lea, 2004; Mary Lea & Brian Street, 1998; Theresa Lillis, 2001, 2003; Joan Turner, 2012). This interrelation of theory and practice draws on Paulo Freire’s (1996) conceptualization of *praxis*, or research-informed action through which a balance between theory and practice is achieved. This balance, we believe, is important for widening participation contexts.

Our approach to academic literacies as *praxis* is based on three core principles which aim to offer students opportunities for: 1) gaining access to and mobilizing the linguistic and analytical tools needed for active participation in their academic and professional communities; 2) developing a critical approach to not only academic discourses but also the broader contexts where these discourses are produced and consumed (e.g., their disciplines and institutions); and 3) increasing their visibility as active participants in the processes of knowledge telling, transformation and creation through dialogue and authorial presence. These three princi-

ples form the basis of our framework for usable pedagogy which will be discussed in the next section.

The framework has been developed with the purpose of providing students with opportunities for transformative practices through which they can gain control over their own personal and educational experiences. Alongside most of the literature on transformative learning (e.g., Jack Mezirow, 2000; Edmund O’Sullivan, 2003), we would argue that transformative practices involve shifts in a number of human spheres: thinking, feelings and actions. These shifts require changes in how we have learned to think of, feel about and act upon the world around us, including ourselves, the relations of power underlying institutional structures, opportunities for access to knowledge and resources, as well as opportunities for success. Transformative practices thus aim to help learners to develop a deep understanding of themselves as main agents in processes such as knowledge creation and discourse construction and co-construction, their own location and positioning, their relationship with other learners and their teachers, and their feelings about themselves. Like constructivist approaches to education (e.g., Lev Vygotsky, 1978), transformative practices recognize that knowledge in all its forms—technical, practical, propositional and procedural—is central to transformation and that learners can become more visible participants of academic practices through inquiry, critical thinking, and dialoguing with peers and lecturers.

Our approach is not a rejection of text-based approaches to academic writing instruction, often known as “English language support”³ (e.g., EAP), in favor of an academic literacies approach which emphasizes “social practices”. We contend that an either-or view is problematic in the context of universities committed to widening participation. Instead, we support Turner’s call for a balance or synergy, “whereby a focus on social practice feeds back into an awareness of textual practice” (Joan Turner, 2012, p. 19) (see also Turner Chapter 28 this volume; for relationship between Ac Lits and EAP, see Theresa Lillis and Jackie Tuck 2015).

Despite having developed in “quite different socio-political contexts” (Ken Hyland & Liz Hamp-Lyons, 2002, p. 4), EAP and academic literacies approaches both aspire to provide students with a more successful educational experience. Our approach couples text-centred pedagogy, which highlights how particular textual and genre-related features are used in specific disciplinary contexts, with the socio-political dimension emphasized by academic literacies. The former allows us to raise novice “home” and “international”⁴ student writers’ awareness of the rules that govern disciplinary academic discourses.⁵ The latter provides opportunities for students to become more aware of, and more confident in, their roles and positioning within their educational contexts.

In the next section we discuss the framework for usable academic literacy pedagogy that we have designed, then illustrate how the framework was implemented in two degree programme subject areas: Art and Design and Nursing. The final sec-

tion concludes the chapter with a brief evaluation of the three underlying principles that make up the framework and the way in which they materialise social inclusion in higher education.

A FRAMEWORK FOR USABLE ACADEMIC LITERACY PEDAGOGY

Paying attention to context, in particular the contextualization of pedagogical practices, is central to our understanding of academic literacies. Contextualization in our work includes a macro level of theorizing (the student's individual and social realities before their institutional experiences, their individual and social identities, their new institutional realities, and the identity of their institution and disciplines) and a micro level of praxis, involving the modules and the lecturers for whom the students are writing. Our aim is that these levels of theory and practice should enable students to empower themselves in their reading and writing, as will be illustrated in the case studies.

Thus our framework aims to—

Facilitate accessibility by:

- Challenging the “institutional practice of mystery” (Lillis, 2001; Turner, 2011) and, by means of analytical tools, helping students to gain access to the often tacit disciplinary expectations (Julio Gimenez, 2012);
- Helping students to develop effective means of expression through raising their awareness of the constitutive nature of language (Turner, 2011) in their construction and representations of knowledge.⁶ One common route to this is the identification of key textual and discursive features in their disciplines (by using linguistic tools), the consideration of alternatives and their impact, and the development of informed student use of such features.

Develop criticality by:

- Helping students to understand the role they play in the academic world that surrounds them. It is only through this understanding that students will be able to fully comprehend “the way they exist in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves” and most importantly to “come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation” (Freire, 1996, p. 64, emphasis in the original);
- Helping students to critically analyze the multiplicity of factors intervening in the processes of producing and consuming texts to avoid collapsing them into monolithic entities (e.g., good and bad writing) (Freire &

Donald Macedo, 2002).

Increase visibility by:

- Encouraging visibility and writer’s voice development through a process we refer to as “dialogics,” that is, by establishing co-operation and dialogue between all the people involved in academic literacy practices. This idea resonates with Bakhtin’s views of dialogue as an aspiration to struggle for, “a range of possible truths and interpretations” (Lillis, 2003, p. 198);
- Empowering students to find ways of becoming more visible (to themselves, their lecturers and institutions) and thus less peripheral to the processes of knowledge telling, transformation and creation, getting their voices as writers heard, and their writer authority respected.

Figure 1.1 illustrates how the elements in the framework are interrelated: visibility depends to a certain extent on criticality and both on accessibility. The diagram also aims to show the proportional relationship between the elements: the more visible the students become as participants of knowledge-making processes, the wider the range of resources, linguistic and otherwise, they can access and control. However, the relationship between the elements is fluid; their sequence is not

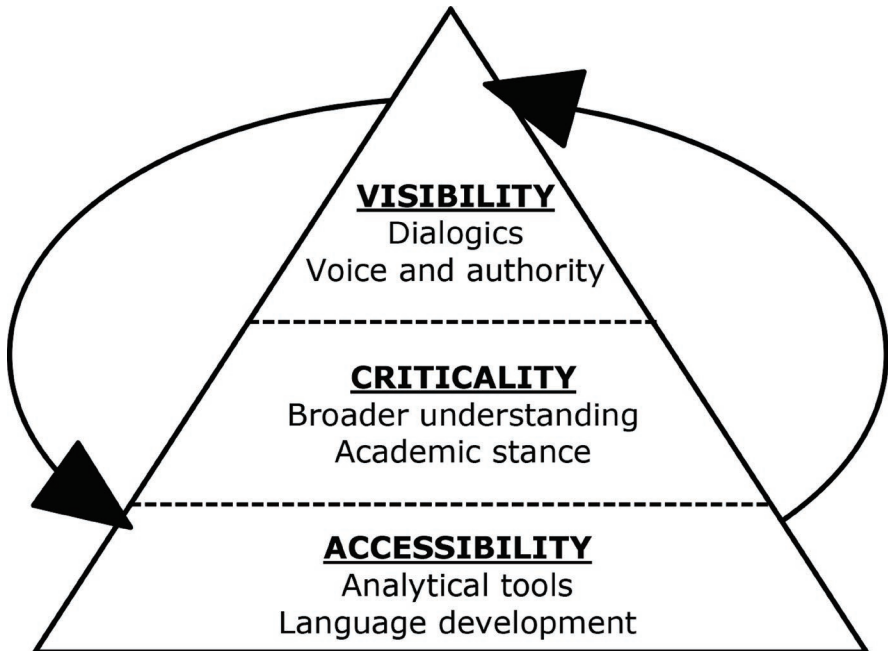


Figure 1.1: Accessibility, criticality and visibility—A framework for usable academic literacies pedagogy.

fixed as will be demonstrated in the case studies.

PUTTING THE FRAMEWORK TO WORK: CASE STUDIES IN ART AND DESIGN AND NURSING

This section examines how the framework was applied in the context of three core modules; “Introduction to History of Art, Architecture and Design,” a first year BA module for a number of programmes in Art and Design; and “Foundations for Nursing Practice” (first year) and “Nursing the Patient with long-term Conditions” (second year), two BSc Adult Nursing modules. The students in these two subject areas differed in terms of their ages (most Art and Design students were in their early twenties whereas most Nursing students were in their early or mid-thirties) and in terms of their relationship with the English language (for most of the nursing students, English was their second or additional language but the majority of the art and design students used English as their first—or only—language). However, almost all students on both programmes can be classified as “non-traditional students,” that is, they are from social groups which have historically been largely absent from higher education: students from working class backgrounds, older than 18 when starting university, some with learning difficulties, and as a group representing a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Against this context, pedagogical interventions representing the framework discussed here were designed and planned by two academic literacy lecturers, the authors of the chapter, in collaboration with the content lecturers in charge of the modules and in discussion with the vice-chancellor of the university. Interventions were delivered as small seminars, which meant they were repeated a number of times. They were scheduled within the degree timetable and most of them were co-taught with the content lecturers.

The following sections of the chapter present two case studies which illustrate how we implemented the framework in the context of the two degree subject areas: Art and Design and Nursing.

A USABLE PEDAGOGY FOR ART AND DESIGN

This case study illustrates an approach to reading *required texts*, which was used in interventions designed for a first year History of Art, Architecture and Design module that runs alongside studio modules. The texts on the module are often part or all of seminal texts (e.g., Benjamin’s *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*) and as such are not introductory. Students can find these texts off-putting because the language is not moderated to suit the non-expert reader, and conceptually the texts can be complicated. The *authoritative* discourse (Bakhtin, in Erik Borg, 2004, p. 195) of texts like these can be perceived to leave little

room for the student-reader, and the text-based practices of contextual studies/history of art, can be seen as restrictive by studio-based art and design students. In contrast, the more *internally persuasive* discourse (ibid.) of object-based practices of the studio tends to be seen as comparatively liberating, because it encourages forms of self-discovery that these texts seem to deny. Reading these texts brings to the fore an epistemological tension between the *distinct worlds* (Michael Biggs & Daniela Büchler, 2012, p. 231) of text- and object-based research practices.

The students on the module share the broadly mixed profile of the university, but many of them also have dyslexia or another SpLD (Special Learning Difficulties).⁷ Biggs (2007, p. 99) identifies that dyslexics seem to favor, “forms of thinking that aid creative work in the arts,” or cognitive activity characterized as a preference for holistic, visual and spatial thinking, rather than sequential and auditory (word-based) thinking.⁸

DEVELOPING CRITICALITY

An important feature of the session is that it draws on studio-related practices, to encourage students to make use of the kind of criticality that they exercise in the studio, with which they often feel more competent. The sessions begin with an image that is relevant to the studio area (e.g., Figure 1.2 for Photography students),

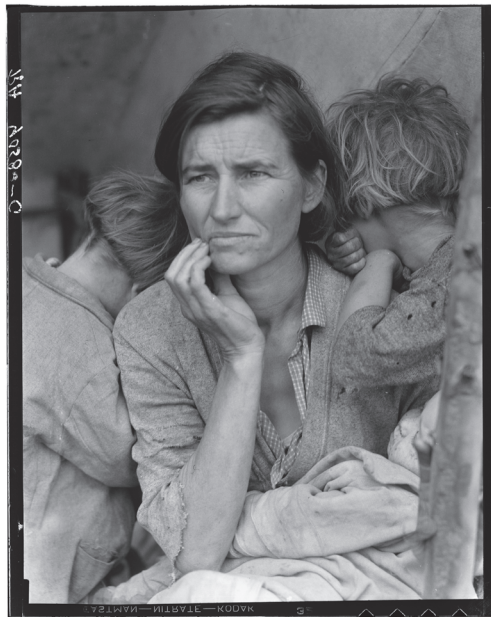


Figure 1.2: Dorothea Lang, *Migrant Mother*, 1936
[permission under Creative Commons].

and we consider questions like: *How do we look at an image? What do our eyes settle on? Is there a prescribed order of looking and what to look at?*

Students tend to suggest that they start to look at what they *want* to start with, and work on from there, selecting their own route-of-looking through the image. In the case of “Migrant Mother,” some of the students have mentioned looking first at her eyes, others start with the backs of the heads of her children, one student mentioned being drawn to the edges of the image, which provide evidence that it has not been cropped, but is a print of the full, original negative.

The session continues with another image of the floor plan of an exhibition, and more questions, this time related to how we encounter an exhibition, like *Do we follow a prescribed order?* Students tend to suggest that to an extent, they do because of curatorial decisions. However, they also speak of following an alternate order, their own, particularly if the exhibition is busy or they have specific interests. Some speak of working backwards, which means encountering the work in counter-curatorial order. We consider whose order is correct, whether meaning remains the same, and whether this matters (see also Good, Chapter 3 and Adams Chapter 4 this volume).

Facilitating Accessibility

Next we address the *required text*. The sessions propose an interpretation of *interactive* reading (David Eskey, 1986, p. 11) that draws on different approaches to reading as necessary. We *objectify the text*, which includes breaking it up (literally, removing the staples and laying it out on the floor, if the text is short enough, see Figure 1.3.). This allows students to see the whole text at once, to examine it as a visual object and look for areas, or *centres*, of interest to them.

They are encouraged to *walk around* the text, literally and figuratively, to consider it from different angles, and to see component parts in a different order, as they might elements in an exhibition. These *centres of interest* are not necessarily at the beginning of the text; the students skim it, as they might a magazine, to find their own starting points. They are encouraged to notice clues (visual elements, repetition of words, etc.) that indicate topics. Having identified centres of interest, students investigate around them, forwards, backwards or sideways, to establish where they seem to start and end.

We address meaning making with initial discussions about the discourse of the text, its genre and purpose, framing linguistic features as language choices that the author has made. The students generally characterize the language as “complicated,” so we look at simplifying strategies like removing modifying language (see simplification of a passage on early cinema in Figure 1.4). The students do this type of activity in small groups on their individual centres of interest, generating interpretations of them.

Discussion and dialogue are important elements of the sessions, which are of-

ten co-taught by a content lecturer and an academic literacy lecturer. We encourage dialogue between all those present in the session, which generates a process of collective meaning making, drawing on Freire's (1996, p. 56) idea of humanistic education. For the last part of the sessions, students are asked to explain one of their centres of interest in the text, and to relate it to their studio practice.

Access here is gained to potentially off-putting texts, and to the process of dialogue towards meaning. We challenge the misconception that less confident student-readers can have, that reading means word-for-word decoding of a hidden message, which reinforces their sense of *incapacity* (Pierre Bourdieu & Jean-Claude Passeron, 1990, p. 111.)

Increasing Visibility

The *visibility* of the studio in the session is an important feature. In drawing on epistemologies of the studio in this non-studio setting, we acknowledge the central role it plays for the student. This responds to the gap/tension between studio/object and text-based practices through emphasising a synergy between art/design and language (Joan Turner & Darryl Hocking, 2004).

The visibility of student decisions or agency is also key. The act of selecting their own centres of interest encourages them to question their role in the reading-writing process. It draws their attention to the possibility that they are reader-creators, generating new knowledge from texts, rather than merely reader-conductors. Also, making choice visible at the level of language accentuates a sense of possibility and

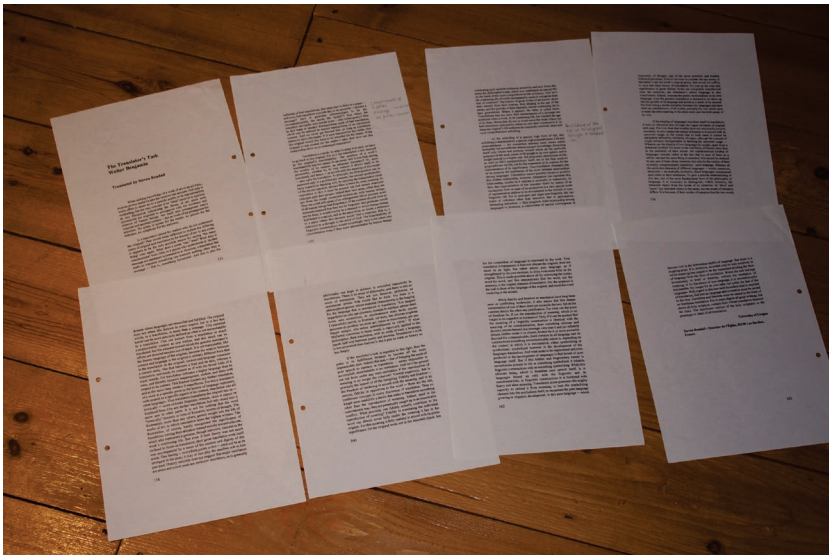


Figure 1.3: Text objectified.

relevance which, for these students, is present in the studio but is often lacking in writing-related activities.

Our approach encourages student-readers to exercise criticality in accessing texts on their own terms. In challenging textual norms they alter the power-relationship between the author and the reader, and *loosen the sway of the author* (Roland Barthes, 1977, p. 143). This does not mean that the author's authority is denied, but as the students navigate the text and map it for their own purposes, it becomes a usable resource for them, rather than an inaccessible holder of secret meaning.

A USABLE PEDAGOGY FOR NURSING

Most nursing students in this and similar institutions are faced with two significant challenges when writing academically: returning to education after some

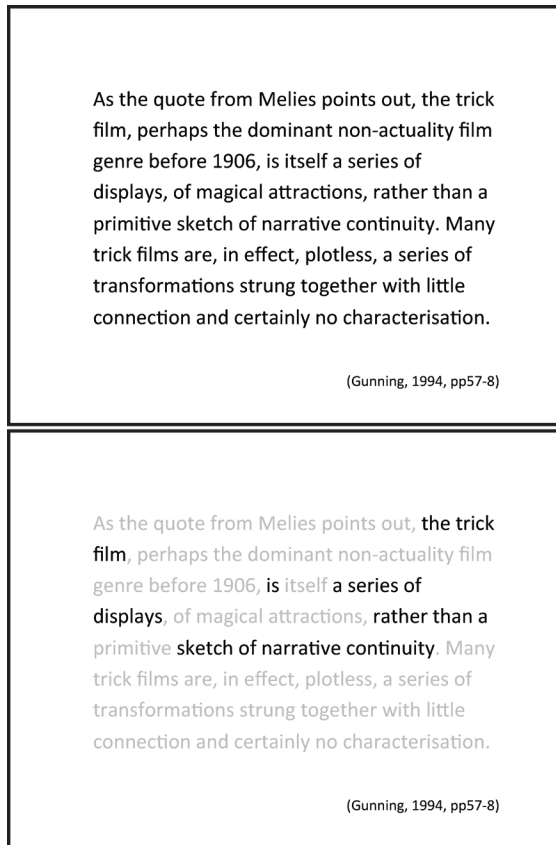


Figure 1.4: Text simplified: A slide used in an intervention with communication arts students (excerpt from Gunning, 1994, pp57-58).

considerable time away and writing in their second or additional language. The case study presented here discusses how the framework was implemented within two nursing modules.

Facilitating Accessibility

One of the first pieces of writing that nursing students are asked to produce is a reflective account. Reflective writing is in itself a rather complicated process that requires a set of distinctive analytical and linguistic skills. Research on reflective writing has shown that writers need to distance themselves from the situation reflected upon in order to analyze it critically and suggest a course of action to improve it (Gimenez, 2010; Beverly Taylor, 2000). It also depends on a fluent command of language so as to present a coherent sequencing of events supported by the correct use of tenses to make complete sense (Kate Williams, Mary Woolliams, & Jane Spiro, 2012). All this poses a real challenge to most of the students on the nursing programme described here.

A number of language development tasks were designed to help students write their first reflective account for the module. In these tasks, the academic literacy and content lecturers start by asking students on the “Foundations for Nursing Practice” module to discuss their previous experiences in writing reflectively, how successful these experiences were, and the challenges they faced. Next, led by the content lecturer, students examine the general role of reflective writing in nursing before they set out to analyze the discourse of reflection. For the discursal analysis, we focus on an “incident in practice” account a student from another cohort has written (see activities in Figure 1.5). We examine questions such as *Who wrote it?*, *For whom?*, *For what purposes?*, and *How has the writer positioned him/herself?* Then, a textual analysis of the account provides insights into its generic structure, organizational patterns, sequential arrangement, and textual patterning. Linguistically, students de-construct the account to examine its language and register. This linguistic exercise is followed by transformation activities that require students to manipulate the discursal, generic and linguistic elements in the account so that it can be located in a different context: a different writer-reader relationship, a different situation, a different outcome. This aims to help students realize the effects of their linguistic choices and the relationship between language and discourse (see also English chapter 17). An example of the texts and activities for this type of intervention is shown in Figure 1.5.

Developing Criticality

In our framework, developing criticality means providing students with opportunities to evaluate the context where they are operating as students and as future professionals, assess their roles and actions, and establish a reflective link between

the present (as student writers) and their future (as professional nurses).

To help students to develop their criticality, a number of activities were designed around a care plan for the “Nursing the Patient with long-term Conditions” module. The first activity requires students to write a care plan by filling in a template typically used in hospitals for these purposes. Following this, a number of activities provide opportunities for critical evaluation. Students critically examine the care provided by a female nurse to an Asian man with a type 2 diabetes condition, taking into account contextual elements (who the patient is, the relationship with his GP, his nurse and the hospital consultant, and his culture and beliefs), their roles as student writers (writing for knowledge telling and knowledge transforming), their role as future nurses (the care provided and how it could be improved), and in what ways writing this text can help them as future nurses

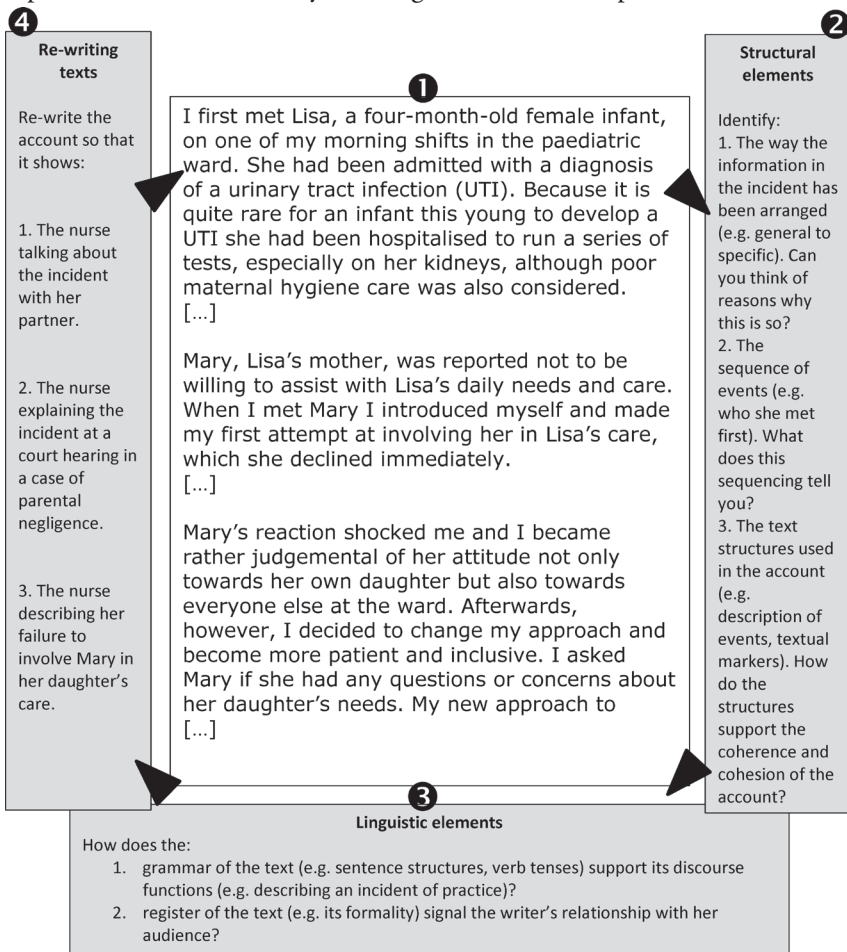


Figure 1.5: Analyzing, deconstructing and transforming text.

(initiating dialogue with their lecturers, markers and also future patients with similar conditions). In this way, criticality becomes both a “textual” activity and an attitude towards self and others.

Increasing Visibility

One way of achieving greater visibility is by students initiating dialogue and co-operation (dialogics) between themselves and key participants in academic literacy practices: other students, lecturers, and markers. In the example about reflective writing provided above, nursing students in their role of academic writers are encouraged to use their outlines and first drafts to continue the dialogue with their lecturers and other students initiated with the analysis of reflective texts and the co-operation in co-constructing the meaning of their own texts. Through this process of dialogics, students are able to discuss how the drafts they have produced represent a range of possible interpretations of the task set by their lecturer and of the disciplinary discourses the assignment is supposed to encapsulate.

By speaking about their texts from their authorial stance, students make it clearer for themselves and others how they are involved in processes of knowledge telling, transformation and creation. Dialogic encounters also offer the students the opportunity to situate their writing within the context of their professional communities, their discipline, and their institutions.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

One central aspect of our development of a praxis of academic literacies, shown in the case studies here, is the need to provide opportunities for students to access and mobilize a variety of linguistic resources. Thus language development is at the heart of the *accessibility* component of our framework. Key sociolinguistic studies (e.g., Jan Blommaert, 2005; James Gee, 1999; Dell Hymes, 1996) demonstrate that success in education, and society as a whole, is largely determined by the linguistic resources individuals have access to and are thus familiar with.⁹ Social systems, of which education is just one, are characterized by structural inequalities including differential access to and distribution of these resources (Blommaert, 2005). By offering opportunities for student writers to engage in analytical tasks, which required not only deconstructing different genres but also transforming them by mobilising a variety of linguistic resources, a process akin to what English calls “re-genering” (2011; see also English chapter 17 this volume), our framework afforded students the opportunity to gain a better understanding of the role and impact of language choices in performing specific academic actions.

By the same token, the activities in our framework aim to demystify a number of academic practices in the context of the degree programmes and, in particular, the modules for which students were writing. Thus the students are not only able

to explore formal aspects of the texts they are writing but also examine the value of those texts within their disciplines and modules, as well as their own expectations as writers and those of their lecturers.

The framework also provides opportunities for the students to critically evaluate their academic and professional contexts to comprehend their present and future roles and actions, and to consider how the reality they are part of is not static but open to negotiation and change. This, we argue, is mainly achieved through dialogue. The students gain a better understanding of their positions as writers of academic texts, and as future professionals, by dialoguing about the processes involved in discipline-specific knowledge creation and transformation; a process of finding their own voice through speaking about their interpretations of the contexts in which they operate.

NOTES

1. Widening participation, according to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), “addresses the large discrepancies in the take-up of higher education opportunities between different social groups. Under-representation is closely connected with broader issues of equity and social inclusion, so we are concerned with ensuring equality of opportunity for disabled students, mature students, women and men, and all ethnic groups” (HEFCE, 2011).
2. For some students English is their mother tongue, for others their second, third, or additional language.
3. A discussion of approaches to teaching and learning academic writing is beyond the remit of this chapter. Readers are referred to Turner (2011, 2012) and Wingate (2012).
4. Like most other categories used to describe groups of people and their behaviour, these categories are also problematic and far from being straightforward but they present a more “realistic” alternative to the “native” and “non-native” labels usually used in these contexts.
5. These rules are familiar to expert writers but are usually left unexplained to students (Turner, 2011).
6. As opposed to the view that language is merely referential (Filmer, et al., 1998, in Turner, 2011, p. 41).
7. Art and design programmes attract some of the largest numbers of students with a Specific Learning Difficulty (SpLD), like dyslexia, at the university. More than 15% of recent applicants for art and design courses identified themselves as dyslexic. The proportion of dyslexics tends to increase as the year progresses because many students are not assessed for dyslexia until they enter HE.

8. Generalized correlations like this should be treated with caution because dyslexia is a highly debated phenomenon, for which a universally accepted definition is elusive (Reid, 2009, p. 2).
9. These resources are theorized variously as a linguistic code (Bernstein, 1971) and a form of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

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