

REFLECTIONS 1

HOW CAN THE TEXT BE EVERYTHING? REFLECTING ON ACADEMIC LIFE AND LITERACIES

Sally Mitchell talking with Mary Scott

One of the tenets of Academic Literacies research is recognition of the personal resources that an individual brings to any situation, practice, or text. In any inquiry the student writer is not bracketed off from the object that she or he produces. Students bring to their writing and study, experiences, values, attitudes, thoughts which are personal as well as “academic” or “disciplinary”—though they sometimes struggle to negotiate these, and can be constrained by the ways in which discourses silence as well as give voice to individual meaning-making. As for students, so, of course, for all of us ...

In this piece Sally Mitchell reflects on a conversation with Mary Scott, one of the key participants in the development of Academic Literacies as a field, and explores what personal trajectories and biographical details can suggest about how a disciplinary (disciplined, theorized, academic) stance and ethos can develop.

Mary Scott (2013a) has recently written a personal, theorized account of her involvement, as a teacher and researcher, with the writing of university students. She frames this journey, which has taken place over a number of years, as “learning to read student writing differently”. I was interested to talk to her about this, and how her biographies—personal, intellectual, professional and institutional—have shaped her thinking and work as someone who, if we think of Academic Literacies as a grouping of certain interrelated *people*, as much as interrelated *ideas*—is a key figure. The relationship between people and ideas—peopled ideas—seems significant, perhaps particularly when we are talking about a field which is also a profession and a practice. Certainly important texts in Academic Literacies explicitly use who the authors are, and where they have come from as part of what they have to say (I’m thinking of Roz Ivanič and Theresa Lillis both who drew on practice to begin theorizing).

When Mary opened our conversation by sharing what’s new in the field—the idea of superdiversity—she talked about how the idea is being tested and contested by various *players*, differently located geographically and theoretically, politically

and temperamentally. Her interest is in seeing new knowledge as *developing, multiply influenced and as voiced*, rather than as “presented,” self-contained and abstract. This stance lies behind Mary’s email list which distributes information to colleagues across the world about conferences, books and talks, as well as in the more grounded termly meetings she has hosted since the early/mid 1990s at the Institute of Education in London. Both are characterized more by their sense of plurality and capacity than by a particular framing. “I wanted [them] not to be doctrinaire,” she says.

Mary studied for her first BA in English and Latin at Rhodes University, South Africa. This was followed by a postgraduate year for which she received a BA honours in English Literature. (The shifting meaning of university qualifications is a significant theme in the conversation). At Rhodes, she had an “inspirational” tutor, Guy Butler, who was also a poet. He wrote a poem called “Cape Coloured Batsman” when he was in the army in Italy, and was subsequently criticized for having neo-colonialist views: “It was the first time anybody had written a sympathetic poem about a colored man, but he wouldn’t write it now.” “Views,” then, are not the sole property of individuals; they are caught up in time, part of social, political, historical moments and movements. So, for example, Butler set up a Study of English in Africa Centre, and it takes me a while to realize there might be any progressive significance to this; to me, it doesn’t sound progressive at all—perhaps the opposite. But Butler was challenging the assumption that English meant *British English* taught in South Africa mainly by academics from Britain—a kind of colonialism within colonialism. Mary herself was entangled with this struggle over language and nation. She was “British by descent” and, at age 16, to fund her study she was given a grant by the “Sons of England Patriot and Benevolent Society” which committed her to teaching English in schools for three years. The Society was concerned at a shortage of good English teachers: “Afrikaans would take over, English would be excluded”. The economic hand-up committed her to more than safeguarding English in schools however; it marked her positioning in English-Afrikaans politics. More or less the contract was: “Now if we give you this money . . . you’ll teach for three years—will you promise us you’ll never vote for the Nationalist government?”

Having paid her dues teaching English (in fact it was largely Latin which the schools thought was more of a rarity), Mary took up an invitation from Guy Butler to return to Rhodes and teach—“poetry, drama, rather than the novel.” Other pressures then saw her move to Cape Town; her father in particular was anxious that she should get a professional qualification and she enrolled to do a two year BEd with a teacher’s certificate while teaching full-time in the Department of English at the University of Cape Town (UCT). It was a pre-requisite at the time that to do a BEd you should have another first degree in a subject discipline—not so today. Mary wrote her thesis on the teaching of Shakespeare in schools, though “schools”

did not include black or coloured schools:

I'm writing about South Africa, and education in South Africa, with a thesis on the teaching of the Shakespeare play in the secondary school. And I'm looking at the kinds of theories that teachers were drawing on in what they were doing, and looking at some examples of students writing about Shakespeare. And it was all terribly much ... something I think that would probably have been done in Britain. There was no local politics included in it. Well, why Shakespeare? It was taken for granted, you know, the classics, the canon, and Shakespeare at the top. ... In all the education, there was an Anglocentric subtext all the time.

Experiences of this kind perhaps shaped in Mary a visceral mistrust of categories, an uneasy relationship with institutions and a scepticism about the orthodoxies of disciplinary meaning making. Another recollection from South Africa shows the political subtext pushing into the foreground of her thinking:

In the days when I did English Literature, there was an emphasis on the close study of the text, even to a ridiculous extreme. I remember trotting out the received wisdom to a student at Cape Town University; he'd said something about the life history of some author. And I said, "Oh no, that's not relevant, you just look at the text." And he said, "Why is it not relevant?" And I went away and thought, "Gosh, I've been talking—you know—I'm just trotting out something without thought. Oh, he's got a point."

Mary's own scholarship still reflects the close attention/sensitivity to texts that her literary training gave her, but recognizing the myopia of English's bracketing of the text's producer perhaps prepared her to critique and challenge the boundedness of disciplines and fields, domains, territories that she encountered, negotiated and was subject to. When finding less encouragement to pursue scholarship and teaching at UCT, than with Guy Butler at Rhodes, she along with other contemporaries applied for grants to study overseas—and in the mid-1970s found herself at the Institute of Education in London. She took the "Advanced Diploma with special reference to the role of language in education" taught by Nancy Martin, Harold Rosen and Margaret Spencer, and she taught part time in secondary and language schools while gradually taking on a fulltime academic post.

When Gunther Kress arrived at the Institute of Education in the early 1990s he and Mary together set up the MA in the Learning and Teaching of English with Literacy. Their collaborative work on this programme established a lasting respect and interest in each others' work: there was perhaps a meeting of ex-colonial minds (Gunther was born in Germany, brought up and educated in Australia) because

though their “official” disciplines were different—Literature, Linguistics—they shared insights into texts/language in and across contexts, how texts are received and how, and who produces them: a sensitivity to the importance not only of who you’re writing *for* (*audience*) but of *who you are* writing:

I think Gunther has always thought about the learner. And I liked that. And the writer in the text. So, he concentrates on texts but he doesn’t leave out a view of the writer—it’s a writer bringing certain resources and assumptions and expectations, and what those are.

Is she talking about “identity” here? Well no, for a South African, identity is a problematic term:

It goes back to history again, personal history I think of it as Jan Blommaert’s’ “ascribed identity,” and we had to carry identity cards in South Africa, and I had one saying I was white, and, you know, the Pass Laws and all that. That’s what immediately comes into my mind—people putting others in brackets and racial categories ...

With Mary and with Gunther, recognition of the writer is never just a way of looking at texts, it’s a way of interrogating where the power lies, what assumptions it rests on, how it maintains itself, how it subjects or subjugates those who come to it for a share. This is perhaps why Mary has preferred the notion of the “subject”—both agent and recipient of categories, discourses, agenda: “identity” for her doesn’t admit of a two-way process (see discussions of Norman Fairclough and Gunther Kress in Mary Scott, 1999; see also Scott, 2013b).

During the 1970s and 1980s in the United Kingdom the increased recruitment of higher fee-paying international students led to a greater recognition at an institutional level of the utility of language teaching. Mary was conscious of the conflicting discourses here: literary texts/student texts, a discipline/training, home students/international students, literate/illiterate. In the implicit or explicit creation of binaries the “versus” often also brings about the creation of deficit. “What is being edited out in the terms we use?” she asked.

Some of the international students were sponsored by their governments and seeking qualifications of higher currency than those in their home country—higher currency, though not necessarily of higher intrinsic value (an echo of Mary’s own experience of taking two degrees classed as bachelor’s in South Africa, that elsewhere and in later years might be classed as bachelor followed by master’s). At the same time, many practising UK teachers were taking their qualifications to degree level.

The Institute decided to offer a BEd for those teachers who had got certificates,

from the days before there was a BEd, so a conversion BEd. They had Certificates of Education, they'd come from training colleges, and many of them were in very senior posts.

Mary offered a "morning programme" to the BEd students:

So, what I tried to do then, with the morning programme, the students would meet on a Monday morning, and beforehand, they would have read some text relevant to the Tuesday evening lecture. And they'd be given a question to consider. Now, as time went on, they might have to read two texts, and the question would get more complicated. And then, on the Tuesday, a couple of them would present what they'd done and it would be discussed. So that when they went to the Tuesday ... evening lectures, they'd have some background ... it wasn't just English and language. And then we'd meet on a Thursday morning, where they could talk about any problems they'd had following the Tuesday lectures or any things that had come up that they hadn't thought of ... it was very intensive.

Although this provision sounds like good teaching full stop, its existence also began in some way to create the role of "language and literacy service provider" in the institution. In 1994 it was given a more secure and prominent footing, when with the support of Gunther Kress, Mary got the backing of Senate to establish the Centre for Academic and Professional Literacy Studies (CAPLITS) with three important functions: teaching, research and consultancy.

In making this move Mary recognized that, despite her mistrust of prefixed distinctions or compartments, within institutions such compartments are often convenient. They attract resource and status and they allow innovation and perhaps resistance (agency), and even whilst they demonstrate compliance to, they are a symptom of an institutional framing. In this framing the institution is cast as providing the things people lack (its deficient recipients), and the ideology is one in which socialization is largely a one-way process towards the reproduction of institutional norms. This emphasis continues to pervade provision in the United Kingdom. Reflecting on a seminar being held later in the academic year to focus staff on the issue of assessment, Mary comments:

From what I can understand, it's all about how to make the norms clearer, that sort of thing. No thought about the people who have been learning here, and how the institution needs to change.

Yet in a world of diversity which is increasingly becoming recognized as a world of

superdiversity, the “meeting of norms seen in a very narrow way is not the solution”.

While, like most institutions, the Institute does not easily cast a critical eye on its role in the education of students from across the globe, the process in the initial establishment of CAPLITS and in Mary’s own thinking has been much more reflexive and developmental. As I’ve mentioned, Mary describes her progression as a researcher as “learning to see [students’] writing differently”; she refers elsewhere to seeing the student text as “a hypothesis” (Mary Scott & Nicholas Groom, 1999; see also Mary Scott & Joan Turner, 2009). But she is also aware of and acutely teased by the question of how research insights relate to, or translate into, practice:

Alright, I can look at this text and see there are all these assumptions and things, but do I look at that simply in terms of how I must lead the student on—*the way they should be?*

Mary doesn’t have any answers if answers were to be in a set of practices. And I’m not sure the tension she points to is a resolvable one, or a question that a teacher/researcher could be expected definitively to solve. Perhaps it is enough that the answer lies in the question; the act or acts of reflexive awareness. For me, I realize, this is what having an “Aclits” orientation means—not so much a pedagogy but a framing of pedagogy which keeps the questions open and keeps questioning, even itself. The question of what *moving the student on* might mean, or look like, without once again casting the student as deficient, could be said to be the key dilemma for the academic literacies practitioner/researcher, but the willingness to hold that question might also be thought of as their key *characteristic*. A kind of temperament. Reflecting on our conversation, this seems to hold true in Mary’s case. She mistrusts the reductionism in simple or single explanations or models, resisting for example, the reading of “Study Skills, Socialisation, Academic Literacies” as distinguishable approaches (“are they models?”), and she is aware of complex framings that impinge on and shape the teacher—making her a pragmatist as well as an idealist.

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