

# REFLECTIONS 3

## WHAT'S AT STAKE IN DIFFERENT TRADITIONS? LES LITTÉRACIES UNIVERSITAIRES AND ACADEMIC LITERACIES

### Isabelle Delcambre in conversation with Christiane Donahue

Isabelle Delcambre is Professor Emeritus at the Université de Lille, France and a member of the Théodile-CIREL laboratory. Christiane Donahue is Associate Professor of Linguistics, Director of the Institute for Writing and Rhetoric, Dartmouth College, US, and a member of the Théodile-CIREL laboratory. Isabelle and Christiane have worked together, exploring university writing in France and the United States via exchanges and shared projects, and have been learning about writing research and teaching in each others' contexts for some twelve years. They have published together and separately on these topics, in particular as the result of a three-year study of French university student writing across disciplines, led by Isabelle.

**Christiane:** You have been at the forefront of research about writing in secondary and postsecondary education in France for decades (e.g., Delcambre 1997). What is the current status of post-secondary writing research and teaching in France?

**Isabelle:** Many research fields study *university practices*—this question is within that context. Aspects that have long been studied include the role of metacognition in university success, and sociological studies (e.g., Pierre Bourdieu & Jean-Claude Passeron, 1964) about students' trajectories and socialization, their failure in the first years, their modes of living and studying, etc. Studies of writing at university, the genres produced there and the forms of continued learning of writing in university contexts have contributed to establishing this larger area of university practices as a field, *la pédagogie universitaire*. In particular, the focus has been on supporting students' entry into a "writing universe." Not all college writing is in the form of exams for evaluation. We have asked ourselves, who are students? Future professionals? Future academics seeking knowledge? Who are faculty? Teachers or researchers?

This diversity of purposes for writing indicates a diversity of practices. Possibly,

a student who writes as a future professional encounters different genres and difficulties from those encountered by a future academic seeking knowledge; the same is true for faculty. Descriptions of academic genres in a rhetorical or functional vein dominated in the 1990s in France. Yves Reuter (1998) was the first to theorize the question of student writers and their difficult relationship to academic writing. The question of the author's identity, or the enunciative perspective on writing appears much later in our research discussions (see the work on "writerly images," Isabelle Delcambre & Yves Reuter, 2002). The current focus on authorship from an enunciative standpoint is the focus of other research groups in France, most notably the Grenoble group (cf. Françoise Boch & Fanny Rinck, 2010).

**Christiane:** Tell me about your first encounter with "Academic Literacies"?

**Isabelle:** I discovered the debates between Jack Goody (e.g., 1977, 1986) and Brian Street (e.g., 1995) in the 1990s. I was first influenced by Goody's theory about writing and the construction of thinking that writing provides; and then I heard of Brian Street's work, incidentally, and I was somewhat astonished that Goody's theories could be challenged. That shows the intellectual domination of Goody's theories in France at that time for researchers, who were not so well informed about research abroad. Later, during a major research project funded by the French government, I met many colleagues from AcLits, and read their essays, discussed with them, and so on ...

**Christiane:** What points of shared interest did you find in these discussions?

**Isabelle:** I was first astonished (and a bit envious) when I encountered the well-established importance of university writing research in AcLits. In those years in France, very few people were interested in such questions, apart from those who developed a "technical skills" point of view on students' difficulties (less frequent nowadays, with the development of "pédagogie universitaire"). The AcLits search for explanations of students' difficulties by the means of concepts such as social practices, identity, power, empowerment and transformation met, in my opinion, our didactic points of view on attitudes towards writing ("rapport à l'écriture"), representations (of writing, of the self as a writer, of knowledge, etc.) and disciplinary awareness (for all these concepts, see Yves Reuter et al., 2013).

But some of these concepts do not receive quite the same definition. For example, *social practices* seem to be, for didacticians, more a range of determinations (historical, cultural and personal) and less a high-stakes object of negotiation, power or struggle. In the same way, when we talk about *representation* there have always been questions about what was intended. In fact, in Educational Sciences, this term, borrowed from social psychology, is quite ordinary, referring to the ideas that people construct about writing processes, writing's functions, its objectives and so on.

In addition, it seems that for AcLits *social practices* applies to social contexts as well as to academic contexts, with the same reference to power and domination (see Street et al., Reflections 5 this volume). In didactics, too, practices are understood both at the university level and in the social world, but I think that didacticians have focused on the influence or relationship between the social and the school world, even in the most ordinary practices of writing. The concept of “*pratiques sociales de référence*” (referential social practices) proposed by Jean Louis Martinand (1986), a didactician of technology, is often used to understand the distance between school genres and socially grounded genres when accounting for the difficulties students may encounter when trying to fulfill school expectations. Many conflicts or tensions could happen between these different kinds of practices.

**Christiane:** The term you have developed in French research is *littéracies universitaires*—university literacies; what are the roots of that term?

**Isabelle:** This field brings together two long-term research traditions, didactics and linguistics, to describe practices and written genres in university contexts (though certainly other fields come into play—psychology, cognition, ethnography ...). “Literacy” emphasizes the contextual, social and cultural aspects of reading and writing.

The intellectual history of the term “literacy” in France includes: Goody (1977, 1986) as a point of departure (thus shared in some ways with UK developments); Françoise Boch et al. (2004) offered attention to university writing in a sustained way, both theoretically and in terms of practices, but not yet using the term “literacy”; Jean Marie Privat and Mohamed Kara in 2006 published “La littéracie,” reflecting on the anglo-saxon tradition of the term; Kara developed “Les écrits de savoir” in 2009, reflecting on the heuristic functions of writing in research disciplines.

In a different vein, Béatrice Fraenkel and Aïssatou Mbodj (2010) developed the social and cultural senses of literacy extensively, introducing in France the New Literacy Studies work, translating foundational pieces such as Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole (1981) and focusing primarily on the ethnological dimensions of New Literacy Studies.

A new name was needed for this new research field with its particular data, its multidisciplinary, its methods and concepts. “Littéracies” allows an echo of “academic literacies” given the shared ground and objects of attention; it allows at the same time attention to what is different. It also allows an essential connection to disciplinary and institutional contexts in the elaboration of practices, but avoids the link to “académique,” seen in French as negative, pretentious, formal; “university literacies” is an institutional sphere of discourse production.

**Christiane:** Why not just “didactics of university French”? Why “literacies”?

**Isabelle:** “Didactics of French” generally refers to the analysis of teaching and learning French as a language, or to remedial practices; it does not generally take up the epistemological and discursive activities of writing. A “didactics of writing” would be meaningless in a French university, in contrast to what US composition theory had to create when it separated from/opposed English literature as a university department and discipline. Because the discipline “French” does not exist in universities (neither for teaching nor for research), references to a “didactics of university French” would seem rather to be linked to French as a school subject.

Why do you think didactics has not developed as a field in Anglo-Saxon traditions? What are (if there are) the specificities of didactics from your point of view? To what extent is it possible to link them in the American panorama? Or maybe it is impossible?

**Christiane:** This is complex. “Didactics” as a field does not indeed seem to exist in at least US Anglo-Saxon traditions. We have Education and we have research in pedagogy, directly informing our teaching. Didactics seems, to me, to fit the research tradition that resists “applicationism” (by which I mean applying research results immediately to pedagogical contexts seeking practical applications) in favor of research that is more detached from the direct realities of teaching. Thus, didactics of, say, science, focuses on the theory of science teaching and learning as a research discipline. This gets complicated for writing; if we discuss a “didactics of writing” we are positing writing as a discipline. And so, here is a strong link to Composition Studies or Writing Studies in the United States, which takes as its object the teaching and learning of university writing as a discipline. Where does “Ac Lits” fit within these framings I wonder?

**Isabelle:** Unlike “university literacies,” whose emergence is linked more to the extension into university levels of the research questions and themes that had been constructed for secondary and primary education writing research (didactics of French), from my point of view, AcLits came about as a specific area of New Literacy Studies, in order to describe non traditional students’ literacies or literacies associated with new practices (distance learning, new media), and with a critical vision with respect to the implicit norms and ways of working of the traditional university. As I understand it, AcLits seeks to understand the specific terrain of the university; it studies relationships to writing; non-native speakers’ encounters with UK university writing; transformation of practices of writing linked to digital environments; distance learning and writing; relationships between personal and university writing; scholars’ writing practices. It supports thinking about university writing as mobilizing relationships of power and forms of identity construction in which students’ writing practices are caught; it develops, in response, a critique of academic writing conventions and attends to different disciplinary contexts. How

do you generally understand AcLits in relation to your US domain?

**Christiane:** For me, US-style “first-year composition” has many of the features that AcLits has developed in terms of writing in the university at large, in the disciplines and beyond. That is, in the United States we have tended to think of the first year of college writing as the site of negotiation and resistance. In the theorizing and analysis of this work, we have sought to understand transformative practices in these contexts. The domain of disciplinary writing has settled far more squarely into an integrative model with a sense of norms and conventions, even as it has argued for writing as transforming the knowledge of the discipline (see also discussion in Russell and Mitchell Reflections 2 this volume). One of the recent trends in US writing scholarship, the “writing knowledge transfer” research, is relevant here in a lateral way. The idea of writing knowledge “transfer” was initially focused on what students learn that can be re-used in subsequent tasks and contexts. What’s interesting is that the goal of integration is more appropriate for the “transfer” model, while knowledge “transformation,” given the dynamic nature of learning and growth, works with appropriation, negotiation, resistance, critical reflection, metacognitive reshaping.

**Isabelle:** I’m thinking now about the connections and differences between what we refer to as “university literacies” and “Ac Lits.” University literacies does not focus on multimodal or new media literacies, at least not yet. To date, university literacies has remained a research field without engaging much with pedagogical practice, while AcLits has engaged both with teaching practices and broader institutional practices. This is perhaps due to the structure of French universities (where faculty are more professors and lecturers than “simple” teachers) and to the dominant contempt for pedagogy (due to faculty evaluation models, which do not give credit for pedagogical activities).

Perhaps most important: AcLits analyzes students’ resistance to university acculturation, reflects on questions of power relations and authority in writing practices, and seeks perhaps even to encourage these resistances; university literacies’ point of departure is not ideological but descriptive (the descriptive analysis of university discourses and students’/teachers’ representations).

Transformation in the sense of challenging or resisting dominant conventions is not the goal of university literacies, at least not to date. Transformation at whatever level—i.e., opening up debate about what kinds of language/s, conventions, semiotic resources can be used at university, is not important to university literacies. University literacies does not have a critical stance towards practices of writing or evaluation, unlike French didactics in secondary school in the 1980s, which deconstructed traditional writing exercises and was highly critical of the practices underlying these exercises (see Jean-François Halté, 1992, for example). University literacies is far too

underdeveloped, far too institutionally “weak” to be transformative in this way. That said, French didactics took 15 years to transform secondary school writing practices, and even today, traditional practices resurface periodically in some contexts.

**Christiane:** So, transforming the university itself and its writing practices is not within the current goals of university literacies. But perhaps university literacies seeks to transform the students’ experiences of entering a universe that is in many ways foreign to what they have known until now? To listen to and understand those experiences? To unseat the dominant view of “writing” as “micro-linguistic competencies,” especially in light of the changing international nature of language demands? Doesn’t “university literacies” seek to transform, in a way, the French university?

**Isabelle:** Yes, for sure. University Literacies is grounded in the idea that students get to the university with writing knowledge and practices that must transform in order to enter into the disciplinary writing practices that they will progressively discover throughout the curriculum. And also in the idea that it is the responsibility of faculty to accompany students in these discoveries, rather than to hope that someday such accompanying will no longer be needed. The ANR research project (e.g. Delcambre and Donahue, 2010, 2012; Isabelle Delcambre & Dominique Lahanier-Reuter, 2010) showed how much the transition from the undergraduate level to the master’s level profoundly transforms students’ conceptions. They talk at length about the new writing challenges they find as they write their master’s theses. University Literacies supports the idea that learning writing is an ongoing task. In that sense, we can say that University Literacies has a transformative approach, based on empirical research that allows descriptions of students’ and teachers’ representations and creates an understanding of the conditions needed for fruitful dialogue between these two groups.

**Christiane:** I’m also thinking that critical discourse analysis—used in Ac Lits and all about power and authority—has specific, deep roots in French theory?

**Isabelle:** Yes, but the French theory (Pierre Bourdieu and Jean Passeron, 1964; Bourdieu 1998; Michel Foucault, 1971), which is the roots of CDA and used in Ac Lits is not discussed in the French university contexts from where “littéracies universitaires” emerges (as you showed in your paper with Cinthia Gannett, John Brereton, Theresa Lillis and Mary Scott—see Donahue et al., 2009). Even if, in France, Bourdieu is central in sociology, and Foucault in philosophy and literature, the fields of didactics, linguistics and even sociolinguistics are not really influenced by Foucault and Bourdieu ...

However French university literacies does include attention to social context and status, student success, etc.: Bourdieu and Passeron, for example (with their extensive focus on social selection, social reproduction), are always on the horizon

of studies of university students' writing. As an effect of the disciplinary organization of the French university, a current rule is not to trespass on others' research domain. Thus, sociological studies are used as contributions to didactics inquiry ("disciplines contributoires," Reuter et al., 2013), not as main references. Yves Reuter does theorize the notion of "tension" as a distinctive feature of writing practices—and this notion can be seen as not so far away from notions of resistance and negotiation. However, tensions in writing are often presented as a way to understand students' difficulties and to help them to resolve these tensions, to modify their attitude towards texts and academic writing. In my opinion, they are not presented as an occasion to modify the academic world or conventions, or only in a very "light touch" and individual way.

There are shared interests between Ac Lits and Univ Lits in the attention given to making visible the implicit expectations of university work, crystallized in a set of rules; it is a complex adaptation for students moving into the postsecondary world; students must "affiliate" with the world of the university, and secondary education cannot prepare them—given the decoding they must do. Seeing it this way means students are not "missing" something but are in a social negotiation. Teachers' and students' representations aren't compatible.

But there are differences between Univ Lits and Ac Lits: university literacies currently focuses on the need to describe textual objects generally practiced in university fields and studies; to identify their specificities (especially those with which students have difficulty) to facilitate learning and appropriation; to deal with difficulties often associated with new genres, new practices, and the distance between students' written culture and university written culture.

**Christiane:** How might the plural "literacies" be important to both Ac Lits and University Literacies?

**Isabelle:** It signifies the multiple social and cultural practices in play. It challenges the idea that literacy is an individual (isolated) cognitive act, as Lea and Street noted in 1998. It allows us to signal that literacy is always linked to social and cultural practices of reading and writing in particular contexts (disciplines too).

**Christiane:** What questions do you have for the future of University Literacies and of Academic Literacies?

**Isabelle:** Currently, the creation of the "ESPE" (Ecoles supérieures du professorat et de l'éducation), which take the place of the former teacher-training institutions inside the universities, is an opportunity for many university structures to think about writing programmes, first for the teachers-to-be, and then, I hope, for all the students .... There are also some universities that are thinking about writing support programmes aimed at PhD students who are "moniteurs," as it was a tra-



dition in the former CIES (Centres d'initiation à l'enseignement supérieur). These “monitors” were, from 1989 to 2009, doctoral students who were paid to learn to become university professors and received a particular training while they covered the small-group work sessions of university courses. Currently doctoral candidates do this work, but they are no longer trained in a consistent way: what individual universities do depends on the political decisions made in each university.

Will we see a didactics of university disciplines taking shape, as scholars like Francis Grossmann and Yves Reuter have suggested in a 2012 issue of *Pratiques*? If it does, it is likely that a deeper reflection on epistemological dimensions of university writing practices will develop. In the same way that didactics of disciplines in secondary school thought through their uses of writing and the specific issues with writing (not just in French but in the sciences, history, mathematics), university disciplines need to elucidate their uses of writing and their textual practices, beyond the narrow level of linguistic micro-skills.

As far as AcLits is concerned, we are very intrigued in France by the questions it asks. The French context does not yet seem ready for some of these questions. But the University Literacies aspects I've just mentioned seem in some ways quite shared with AcLits: deeper reflection on epistemological dimensions of university writing, for example, or deeper understanding of the fluid nature of genres that are adopted and adapted by different university populations.

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