

## ‘Academic Literacies approaches to Genre’?\*

### *Abordagens de gênero para letramentos acadêmicos’?*

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ABSTRACT: I provide an overview of approaches to writing referred to as ‘academic literacies’ building on broader traditions, such as New Literacy Studies, and I draw out the relevance of such traditions for the ways in which lecturers provide support to their students with regard to the writing requirements of the University. I offer three case studies of the application of academic literacies approaches to programmes concerned with supporting student writing, in the UK and the USA. I briefly conclude by asking how far these accounts and this work can be seen to bring together many of the themes raised at SIGET conferences - including academic literacies and its relation to genre theories - and express the hope that it opens up trajectories for future research and collaboration of the kind they were founded to develop.

KEYWORDS: Academic literacies; student writing; genre theories.

RESUMO: Neste trabalho, eu apresento uma visão geral de abordagens para a escrita conhecida como ‘letramentos acadêmicos’, construídas sob a luz de tradições mais amplas, como os Novos Estudos de Letramento; também aponto a importância dessas tradições nos modos pelos quais professores dão apoio aos seus alunos no que diz respeito às exigências da escrita acadêmica. Ilustro o trabalho com três estudos de caso de aplicação de abordagens de letramento acadêmico em programas que dão apoio à escrita, no Reino Unido e nos Estados Unidos. Concluo perguntando como essas questões e este trabalho podem ser usados para reunir e colocar em prática muitos dos temas abordados nas conferências do SIGET - incluindo letramentos acadêmicos e sua relação com as teorias de gêneros - e expressar o desejo de que isso abra caminhos para futuras pesquisas e colaboração do tipo a que eles foram fundados para desenvolver.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Letramento acadêmico; escrita de estudantes, teorias de gênero.

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## Academic Literacies approaches

I will briefly review the recent academic literacies tradition in the UK as a frame from which to consider three case studies of the application of these approaches to practical programmes of teaching in the UK and USA Higher Education systems. The notion of 'academic literacies' developed from the area of 'new literacy studies' (GEE, 1996; STREET, 1984) as an attempt to draw out the implications of this approach for our understanding of issues of student learning.

Lea & Street, (1997) argued that educational research into student learning in higher education has fallen into three main perspectives: Study Skills; Academic Socialisation; and Academic Literacies (see FIG. 1). The study skills approach has assumed that literacy is a set of atomised skills which students have to learn and which are then transferable to other contexts. The focus is on attempts to 'fix' problems with student learning, which are treated as a kind of pathology. The theory of language on which it is based emphasises surface features, grammar and spelling. Its sources lie in behavioural psychology and training programmes and it conceptualises student writing as technical and instrumental.

In recent years the crudity and insensitivity of this approach has led to refinement of the meaning of 'skills' involved and attention to broader issues of learning and social context, what we (LEA & STREET, 1998) have termed the academic socialization approach. From an academic socialisation perspective, the task of the tutor / advisor is to inculcate students into a new 'culture', that of the academy. The focus is on student orientation to learning and interpretation of learning tasks, through conceptualisation for instance of a distinction between 'deep' and 'surface' learning (HOUNSELL, 1988). The sources of this perspective lie in social psychology, in anthropology; and in constructivist education. Although more sensitive to both the student as learner and to the cultural context, the approach could nevertheless be criticised on a number of grounds: it appears to assume that the academy is a relatively homogenous culture, whose norms and practices have simply to be learnt to provide access to the whole institution. Even though at some level disciplinary and departmental difference may be acknowledged, institutional practices, including processes of change and the exercise of power *do not seem to be* sufficiently theorised. Despite the fact that contextual factors in student writing are recognised as important (HOUNSELL, 1988;) this approach tends to treat writing as a transparent medium of representation and so fails

to address the deep language, literacy and discourse issues involved in the institutional production and representation of meaning.

The third approach, the one most closely allied to the New Literacy Studies, we refer to as academic literacies. This approach sees literacies as social practices, in the way we have outlined above. It views student writing and learning as issues at the level of epistemology and identities rather than skill or socialisation. An academic literacies approach views the institutions in which academic practices take place as constituted in, and as sites of, discourse and power. It sees the literacy demands of the curriculum as involving a variety of communicative practices, including genres, fields, and disciplines. From the student point of view a dominant feature of academic literacy practices is the requirement to switch practices between one setting and another, to deploy a repertoire of linguistic practices appropriately to each setting, and to handle the social meanings and identities that each evokes. This emphasis on identities and social meanings draws attention to deep affective and ideological conflicts in such switching and use of the linguistic repertoire. A student's personal identity - who am 'I' - may be challenged by the forms of writing required in different disciplines, notably prescriptions about the use of impersonal and passive forms as opposed to first person and active forms, and students may feel threatened and resistant - 'this isn't me' (LEA, 2004). The recognition of this level of engagement with student writing as opposed to the more straightforward study skills and academic socialisation approaches, or the focus on text types typical of the genre approach, comes from the social and ideological orientation of the 'New Literacy Studies'. Allied to this is work in Critical Discourse Analysis, Systemic Linguistics and Cultural Anthropology which has come to see student writing as constitutive and contested rather than as skills or deficits. There is a growing body of literature based upon this approach, which suggests that one explanation for student writing problems might be the gaps between academic staff expectations and student interpretations of what is involved in student writing (LEA, 2004; LEA; STREET, 1997; STIERER, 1997; STREET, 1995).

- a. **Study Skills:**  
 'fix it'; atomised skills; surface language, grammar, spelling; *deficit*  
 sources: behavioural psychology; training  
 >*student writing as* technical skill and instrumental
- b. **Academic Socialisation:**  
 inculcating students into new 'culture'; focus on student orientation to  
 learning and interpretation of learning task e.g. 'deep' and 'surface' learning  
 homogeneous 'culture', lack of focus on institutional practices, change power  
 sources: social psychology; anthropology; constructivism  
 >*student writing as* transparent medium of representation
- c. **Academic literacies:**  
 literacies as social practices; at level of epistemology and identities  
 institutions as sites of / constituted in discourses and power  
 variety of communicative repertoire e.g. genres, fields, disciplines  
 switching re linguistic practices, social meanings and identities  
 sources: 'New Literacy Studies'; Critical Discourse Analysis; Systemic  
 Linguistics; Cultural Anthropology  
 >*student writing as* constitutive and contested

FIGURE 1 – Models of Student Writing in Higher Education

The explication of the three models proposed by Lea and Street has been drawn upon very widely in the literature on teaching and learning across a range of HE contexts (see, e.g., Thesen and van Pletzen, 2006, on South Africa) and calls for a more in depth understanding of student writing and its relationship to learning across the academy, thus offering an alternative to deficit models of learning and writing based on autonomous models of literacy.

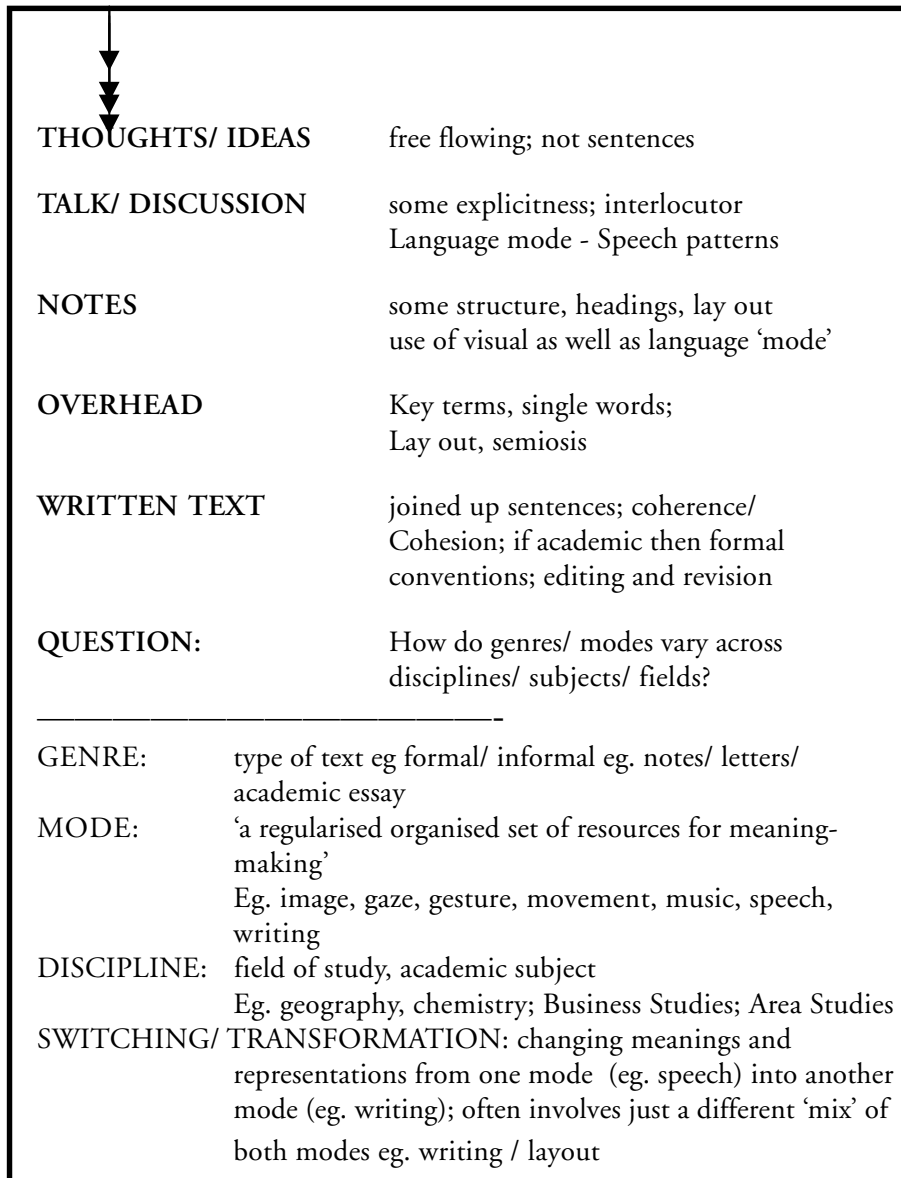
The ACLITS approach, then, is about *literacies*—plural, and deliberately so—in higher education, primarily. In the UK, literacy (singular) as been more traditionally associated with school and adult learning, rather than the university. Indeed, there is still a strongly held belief amongst most UK university teachers that literacy needs to be attended to before students embark upon higher education studies (a view that is shared by many—perhaps most—US university teachers). ACLITS is working to change that view of literacy by taking social practices approaches to multiple and plural literacies, often associated with 'New Literacy Studies' (cf. GEE, 1996; STREET, 1996), into actual practices in the university.

Increasingly, practitioners in the UK are beginning to draw on the general framing offered by the academic literacies perspective, although not always explicitly. A regular Academic Literacies (AcLits) conference draws together those working across settings in the field of writing support, who are adopting a social practice model of writing. A number of institutions have pursued schemes for supporting students and their teachers, often in relation to widening participation. These developments are frequently initiated by educational development departments and supported by some form of student learning centres; although both these generally have a broad brief of which writing is only a part, taken together they are generally the most important institutional sites for writing development in the UK. Whilst educational development departments work directly supporting faculty with issues of teaching and learning, including student writing, the brief of most student learning centres is to work only with students. Coupled with the fact that the latter is often low status, hourly paid work and the academic credibility of the former is continually under threat as universities are increasingly reluctant to employ educational developers on academic contracts, the kinds of approaches suggested by Lillis and Lea not very extensive. One successful exception is the Thinking Writing scheme at Queen Mary (inspired by Cornell's WID program) (SWALES, 1990) and indeed the most recent AcLits conference was held at Queen Mary in the summer of 2009. At this conference the link between theory and practice was explicitly addressed and I will report on this approach and some of these debates below, along with brief descriptions of another programme in the UK - the Widening Participation Academic Language Development Programme at King's College London; and a Course at the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania that made use of academic literacies perspectives in characterising 'Hidden Features' of academic paper writing.

Colleagues and myself have used the kinds of approaches signalled here, in a Widening Education Programme at King's College London, notably, for our present interest, with respect to issues of 'Genre and Mode Switching' in student classroom activity (reported in SCALONE; STREET, 2006; LEUNG; SAFFORD, 2005; and LEA; STREET, 2006). Here tutors expose students to some of the meta-linguistic terminology associated with the kinds of studies cited here, notably with respect to 'Genre' but also with regard to recent work in Multi Modality. Drawing on the work of Kress (2003) we defined genres as types of text, both spoken and written, such as student

discussions, written notes, letters, academic essays etc. We wanted to help students be more aware of the different language - and more broadly semiotic - practices associated with different genres.

In one of the earlier sessions one of the tutors gave a presentation on genre switching (see FIG. 2). He drew attention, for instance, to the fact that prior to having a discussion, just having thoughts and ideas about a subject already involves certain kinds of representation, with different entailments than required in other forms or genres. Thoughts may, for instance, be free flowing, they may not always operate in sentences and they may include images and other non linguistic semiosis such as colours. When the students were asked to move into group talk and discussion, however, they would be required to provide some explicitness, to take account of their interlocutor and to employ specific language features and defined speech patterns. This, then, we identified as a different genre. Likewise, as they shifted to taking notes, new requirements came into play, such as the need for more explicit attention to structure, use of headings, lay out etc. and use of visual as well as language 'modes'. We encouraged students to make presentations to the whole class using overhead projector slides and again these have particular genre features, such as highlighting of key terms, use of single words and lay out. Finally, they were asked to provide a page of written text based upon the discussions and overheads and these required joined up sentences; attention to coherence and cohesion, use of formal conventions and attention to editing and revision. Each 'genre' then, had different qualities and we were concerned that students had not always been made explicitly aware of this as they were required to move between different genres in their school work or given time to dwell on and develop the distinctive features of each, or to address the question of their relationship, including the fluid overlap of the boundaries of each genre (see FIG. 2).



**FIGURE 2 – Genre / Mode Switching**

The teachers asked, for instance, how do genres and modes vary across disciplines, subjects and fields? Students from science disciplines appeared less familiar with extended prose but adept at structured lay out and use of signs, whilst social science students had had more written work to do in their school practice but had not necessarily differentiated its features from those of talk and visual layout as explicitly as we were doing in these sessions. In some cases they reported that teachers would follow a discussion by asking them to 'write it up' without necessarily making explicit the different requirements as they switched genre. Explicit attention to switching, transformation and the changing meanings and representations from one genre to another and that this often involves a different 'mix' of two or more genres, such as the notion that writing always creates meaning through layout as well as the use of words, was a basic premise of our pedagogy in the course. It might appear that we used the concept of genre in perhaps a broader sense than that evident in some linguistic traditions called upon at SIGET and it will be interesting to compare the example given here with those provided by others who have attended the SIGET conferences.

The original aim of the **Thinking Writing** initiative at Queen Mary University London was:

To enhance the development of student writing through supporting staff and departments in the piloting of new discipline-based writing-intensive courses and through the dissemination of good practice.

Sally Mitchell, as head of the TW Unit was instrumental in carrying these perspectives into different disciplines and working with tutors to help support their students' writing in ways that corresponded closely to discipline needs and practices, rather than the more usual approach that assumes a uniform, generic writing to be taught to all students irrespective of discipline. Responses to this conceptualisation of the 'problem' included the provision of writing courses by a central unit - where students might be 'fixed'. The relationship between *Generic and Specific* responses to student writing difficulties is a major theme running through the work of academic staff both at QM and more widely across the UK. both those in the TW programme and discipline specific tutors often newly sensitised to these issues. The programme engaged strongly with work in the USA, notably that of David Russell and of Bazerman (1988). Russell's book (1991) showed how Writing Across the Disciplines (WAC) was established as an academic discipline in the



late 1970s in the USA and the TW programme builds strongly on the WAC tradition. Similarly, Bazerman's early work in the USA (1988), in particular his claim that writing matters because the different choices around what and how we write results in different meanings, underpinned the framing for both research and practice with student writers.

Whilst the TW approach, building upon such work of colleagues in the USA, recognises that responses to 'problems' with student writing depend on how the relationship between writing and 'content' knowledge is conceptualised, for many academics in the UK writing is still seen as a set of generic skills separate from the thinking and conceptualising required in a particular discipline, akin to Lea and Street's notion of 'study skills'. The outcome of a recent Review of the QM programme was that both members of the TW team and members of disciplines working with them, felt that there is a need for HEIs in general to recognise that the 'students can't write' view is misleading. The perspective put forward to counter this dominant view was that the act of writing, for all disciplines, requires an ability to conceptualise, to "see with new eyes" both the processes and purposes of writing. How this might be achieved may still be uncertain but the TW approach has helped set this process in motion and is being closely observed by staff in other universities. Indeed the most recent AcLits conference was held at Queen Mary in the summer of 2009 and there the link between theory and practice and between generic and specific writing support was explicitly addressed. A major theme there was what Lillis and Scott (2008) refer to as the distinction between normative and transformative approaches to academic literacies. Referring to their account in a paper that attempted to sum up the current position in the academic literacies field, they signal many of the traditions cited above concerning approaches to academic writing, seeing the ideological model of literacy as a source for this particular distinction:

The ideological stance towards the object of study in what we are calling 'academic literacies' research can be described as explicitly *transformative* rather than *normative*. A normative approach evident for example in much EAP work can be summarised as resting on the educational myths that Kress (2003) describes: the homogeneity of the student population, the stability of disciplines, and the unidirectionality of the teacher-student relation. Consonant with these myths is an interest to 'identify and induct': the emphasis is on identifying academic conventions – at one or more levels of grammar, discourse or rhetorical structure or genre – and on (or with a view to)

exploring how students might be taught to become proficient or 'expert' and developing materials on that basis. A transformative approach in contrast involves an interest in such questions but in addition is concerned with: a) locating such conventions in relation to specific and contested traditions of knowledge making; b) eliciting the perspectives of writers (whether students or professionals) on the ways in which such conventions impinge on their meaning making; c) exploring alternative ways of meaning making in academia, not least by considering the resources that (student) writers bring to the academy as legitimate tools for meaning making (examples of pedagogy informed by the latter approach are to be found in CLARK; IVANIČ, 1991; IVANIČ, 1998, 2004; LEU, 2006; LILLIS, 2006).

Interestingly for our present discussion, Lillis and Scott also locate this discussion in the broader comparisons of UK and US traditions with which this paper has been concerned:

It is important at this point to signal two key differences between the significant strand of US based literature which adopts a transformative interest in academic writing and the way in which 'academic literacies' as a field has developed in the UK and other national contexts such as South Africa. The first difference is the institutional context: in the UK – in contrast for example with the US – questions about literacy practices are being played out within the everyday business of disciplinary study, not within a specified 'writing' designated spaces (such as composition, or basic writing, writing centres, TESOL classes). The second is that in US writings, transformative discussions tend to be forged out of the disciplinary traditions of literary studies and cultural theory and to remain at a theoretical level, with detailed empirical observation often lacking. In attempting to clarify what constitutes an 'academic literacies' field of inquiry internationally, we argue that it is a transformative interest in meaning making set alongside a critical ethnographic gaze focusing on situated text production and practice. This involves a commitment to staying rooted in people's lived experiences and an attempt to explore what may be at stake for them in specific contexts (LILLIS; SCOTT, 2008, p. 13).

However, my third example does indicate that the US tradition also has space for incorporating an academic literacies perspective. In this paper on some 'Hidden Features' in academic paper writing, I (STREET, 2009) describe the development of a set of working concepts to enable students and their professors to address issues involved in the writing of academic papers.

The ‘features’ I describe here call upon many of the recent theoretical turns described above, in the fields of Writing in the Disciplines (WiD), Genre Studies and Academic Literacies and I consider whether and how such theory can be adapted to practice. Whereas dominant models of student writing (ESP; ESL), as we have seen, have tended to emphasise formulaic lists of things to be covered, usually in terms of the structure of the essay (e.g., Introduction; Theory; Methods; Data), this approach focuses on the more ‘hidden’ features that are called upon in judgments of academic writing that often remain implicit. The paper describes how, during a literacy course at the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania, a table of terms was drawn up for making explicit the criteria used for assessing and reviewing academic papers. In the first instance this framework (see below) was applied to the chapters of an edited book with particular respect to the opening sections, using a typology of ‘vignettes, personal, declarative’. The terms in the ‘hidden features’ table as a whole were then used to review drafts of students’ assignments for the course. The paper concludes with some student responses and the implications for wider applications in support of academic writing are considered. In terms of the present discussion, we might ask whether Street’s approach here, applying academic literacies theory in practice, can be seen as ‘transformative’ in the sense indicated by Lillis and Scott. It seems appropriate to end this account with the comment of one of the students on the course as a way of opening up such discussion and locating this particular practice in the larger context indicated above and indeed in the SIGET Conference as a whole:

As students came from a range of disciplines within the broader umbrella of education (history, reading/writing/literacy, linguistics, etc.) this process made us confront our own assumptions or norms of “correct” academic writing in terms of these different features and to make explicit to our peers why we were adapting them in certain ways. In addition, this process makes (student) authors feel vulnerable and could be intimidating, yet a class atmosphere where everyone would eventually be in the spot light of sharing their own work as well as offering feedback to others helped ease that tension and engage the group in collaborative, constructive feedback. And of course, the features gave the group a collective vocabulary to make explicit the questions or critiques we had—instead of subconsciously feeling that something was unclear, it helped us specify in others’ and our own writing exactly why it was unclear and discuss it in meaningful ways. (S. LIPINOVA, personal communication; cited in STREET, 2009, p. 15).

Framing	
Genre	
Audience	
Contribution/ "So what?"	
To knowledge	
To field	
To future directions/ research	
Voice	
	Blommaert, 2005; cf. p. 222; "Voice refers to the capacity to make oneself understood as a situated subject... Bourdieu's concept of habitus can be useful... provided we see habitus as ethnographically grounded, i.e., as allowing for the situated, performed subjectivities... this addresses"
	Ivanic, 1998; cf. Preface p. 1; "Who am I as I write this book? I am not a neutral, objective scribe conveying the objective results of my research impersonally in my writing. I am bringing to it a variety of commitments based on my own interests, values, beliefs which are built up from my own history..."
Stance	
Person/ Agency	
Reflexivity	
	Hyland, 1999; cf. pp. 99/ 101; "... in presenting informational content, writers also adopt interactional and evaluative positions. ... Stance refers to the ways that writers project themselves into their texts to communicate their integrity, credibility, involvement, and a relationship to the subject matter and their readers.
Signalling	
	Brief references to setting/ theory/ method (to be fleshed out in other parts of the text)
Structure	
Opening:	
Vignette	
Personal	
Declarative	
Indicative	
Setting	
Theory	
Methods	
Data	
Conclusions	

**FIGURE 3 – 'Hidden' Features of Academic Paper Writing**  
**(from Street, B 2009 "Hidden' Features of Academic Paper Writing"**  
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## Conclusion

As the Russell *et al.* paper, arising from a previous SIGET conference, concludes: 'at a time when UK and European university policy makers, research funding and assessment bodies seem to be demanding generic and normalised academic writing, ACLITS research illuminates both the pragmatics and problematics of genre and / in academic writing. Such discussions of pedagogy and genre between ACLITS and WAC approaches seem a fertile ground for producing new strains of pedagogical thought and action'. I hope, like them, that this mapping will open up a discussion, not only within the US and UK, but also within other countries where the ACLITS and / or WAC research and practice have been taken up. My own position, as indicated above in the discussion of both ACLITS theory and of practical programmes, leans perhaps towards the more critical stance indicated by Lillis and Scott and the activity and social practice approach signaled by recent work in the US and the UK. In any case such a discussion has brought together many of the themes raised at SIGET conferences and I hope that it opens up trajectories for future research, practice and collaboration of the kind they were founded to develop.

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