Academic literacies: a pedagogy for course design

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This article examines how research findings from the field of academic literacies might be used to underpin course design across the broad curriculum of higher education. During the last decade this research has unpacked the complex relationship between writing and learning, and pointed to gaps in students’ and tutors’ understanding of what is involved in writing for assessment. The article takes this as its starting point but suggests that the focus on particular groups of students and on student writing alone might mask the relevance of the research findings for teaching and learning in higher education more generally. In addition, the increasing use of information and communication technologies and virtual learning environments add dimensions which are only beginning to be recognized in the academic literacies literature. The article uses a specific case study of an online, postgraduate course to explicate some principles of course design, derived from academic literacies research, which take account of the different texts involved in student learning, and do not focus merely on assessed writing. This case study also pays some attention to the ways in which the use of new technologies can be used to the advantage of course designers adopting these principles.

Introduction

How can research on academic literacies have any relevance for course designers? This article sets out to explore this question and also suggest some possible answers. I begin by outlining academic literacies as a research field, and consider how its findings could have more widespread value and applicability. The main body of the article is concerned with outlining and explicating the principles of an approach to course design which is based on the outcomes of academic literacies research, and the possible ways in which these might be implemented in practice. I illustrate this through the use of a specific case study, a postgraduate online course for practitioners in post-compulsory education.

Supporting the relationship between writing and learning is not generally regarded as the remit of course designers. As subject specialists they are usually primarily concerned with course content and, therefore, often overlook the ways in which

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writing and textual practices more generally are central to the process of learning. At the same time, research in the field of academic literacies has gone a long way in unpacking the complex relationship between writing and learning; this understanding now needs to be brought more centrally into mainstream course delivery. This article is an attempt to respond to both of the above by suggesting a pedagogy for course design based on principles derived from research in the field; the focus on pedagogy—the science of teaching—brings to the fore the relationship between the institutional practices of teaching and course design. The increasing use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and virtual learning environments (VLEs) in today’s higher education offers new opportunities for implementing this kind of approach.

Situating academic literacies research
The last decade has seen the development of a body of work described as Academic Literacies. This work is closely linked to the New Literacy Studies, which challenge the belief that literacy is concerned with the acquisition of a particular set of cognitive skills, which once acquired can be put to use unproblematically in any new context (Street, 1984; Gee, 1990; Barton, 1994). Work in the New Literacy Studies draws on linguistics and social anthropology for its theoretical and methodological framing. It takes as its starting point the position that literacy is not a unitary concept; reading and writing—literacies—are cultural and social practices, and vary depending upon the particular context in which they occur. The more recent work in the field of Academic Literacies (Jones et al., 1999; Lea & Stierer, 2000) has been concerned to build on these frameworks through research into the particular contexts of higher education and the apparent gaps between tutors’ and students’ understanding of writing for assessment.

Academic literacies research has been undertaken in a diverse range of settings: in both traditional and post-1992 universities (Lea & Street, 1998); in distance learning settings (Stierer, 1997; Lea, 1998); and with non-traditional entrants to higher education (Lea, 1994; Lillis, 1997; Ivanić, 1998). The research undertaken in the field tends to be qualitative in nature and of an ethnographic type, adopting language-based methodologies drawn from social linguistics. These methodologies have enabled researchers to look in depth at students’ and tutors’ interpretation of student writing in higher education. Close textual analysis of, for example, student writing or tutor feedback on that writing, has provided a rich source of data which complements interviews and notes from fieldwork observation. Although different institutional contexts and groups of students taking a wide range of courses have been studied, research findings all indicate a complex relationship between the acquisition and development of subject-based knowledge and writing in higher education. More specifically, they all point to the difficulties faced by students when trying to unpack the ground rules of writing in any particular context. These studies have given us an insight into the relationship between the texts that students produce during their studies and the practices which are implicated in the production of these texts.
In 1998 Brian Street and I published an article in this journal which set out an academic literacies framework for understanding student writing in higher education (Lea & Street, 1998). Based on our findings from research carried out with staff and students in two UK universities, we outlined three approaches to student writing in higher education. These we referred to as perspectives or models: study skills; academic socialization; and academic literacies. Although none of these perspectives was presented as mutually exclusive, the article privileged and explicated what we termed the academic literacies model. One challenge to this academic literacies model has been its apparent lack of attention to pedagogy. For example, Lillis (2003) suggests that unlike the other two models—study skills and academic socialization—it is unclear what academic literacies looks like in terms of pedagogic practice. She suggests (p. 192) that:

> Whilst powerful as an oppositional frame, that is as a critique of current conceptualisations and practices surrounding student writing, academic literacies has yet to be developed as a design frame (Kress, 1997, 2000) which can actively contribute to student writing pedagogy as both theory and practice.

Lillis uses the term ‘design’ ‘in the broad sense of the application of research generated understandings to pedagogy’ (p. 195). She makes, therefore, a comparable link between pedagogy and research to that being taken in this article. She is, however, less concerned with the specific context of course design, which is the primary focus here. Whilst agreeing with Lillis that academic literacies has yet to be fully developed as a design frame, I argue that the focus of this body of research, both on critique and primarily on student writing, might also indicate why the work has not yet been taken up by educational developers concerned with pedagogy and practice more broadly, rather than specifically with supporting assignment writing.

Research in the field of academic literacies is in the main informed by disciplinary perspectives which have not traditionally been associated with research into student learning. We (Lea & Street, 1998) argued in our earlier publication that previous work on student orientation to learning and the interpretation of learning tasks—broadly that which sits within the phenomenographic tradition (Marton et al., 1997)—suggests that the academy is a relatively homogeneous culture whose norms and practices can be learnt in order to gain access to the whole institution. This is, of course, not to deny the value of research in this tradition in revealing differences in students’ experiences. Similarly, recent approaches to learning which utilize the concept of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), often fail to recognize the multiplicity of communities of practice within the academy and focus instead upon the novice student acting as an apprentice moving towards full membership in the wider university community (cf. Northedge, 2003).

The strength of the academic literacies approach has been that it does not assume that students are merely acculturated unproblematically into the academic culture through engaging with the discourses and practices of established practitioners. This is what Lillis refers to as ‘critique’. The work on academic literacies argues that the relationship of students to the dominant literacy practices and discourses of the academy is more complex than other work on understanding student learning might
suggest. That is, students are active participants in the process of meaning-making in the academy, and central to this process are issues concerned with language, identity and the contested nature of knowledge. However, it could be argued that one of the limitations of the work in the field is that, in general, it has tended to foreground firstly, particular groups of students, and secondly, assignment writing. The tendency of the research to focus on non-traditional students and on the assessed product, whilst a valuable starting point, should not blind us to the much broader implications of work in the field; in particular in the arena of course design, since all students are negotiating a range of different texts as part of their studies.

**Practitioner-based research and the non-traditional student**

One characteristic of the research is that it has been both practitioner-based and practitioner-led. Much of it has been carried out by academic practitioners, working closely in different contexts with student writers, whose practice and research coincided with profound changes in higher education in the late 1980s and 1990s, when they saw large numbers of non-traditional entrants, many from Access courses, enter higher education. Early work in the field was oriented towards these contexts (Clark & Ivanic, 1991; Lea, 1994; Pardoe, 1994; Thesen, 1994; Creme, 1996) and often informed by earlier related work in the USA (Shaughnessy, 1977; Rose, 1989). The focus, therefore, has been primarily on the ‘non-traditional’ student: the mature student (Lillis, 1997; Ivanič, 1998); the nursing student (Baynham, 2000); the black student (Thesen, 2001); and non-native speakers of English (Pardoe, 1994).

The implications of the research for broader teaching and learning agendas in higher education have been slow to be implemented in practice more generally with students across the university. However, there are notable exceptions to the research orientation: for example, Stierer’s (1997) research on postgraduate education students studying at a distance; Pardoe’s (2000) research with postgraduates in environmental science; Cohen’s (1993) research with conventional 18-year-old undergraduates in the University of Pennsylvania; and Scott’s work with students on a Postgraduate Certificate of Education course (2000). These studies suggest the need to attend more broadly to the workings of academic literacy practices, rather than confine attention to students who—by virtue of their entry to university via a non-traditional route—are seen as marginalized by a dominant academic culture. The tendency of the research in the field to concentrate on the non-traditional entrant and their writing, whether in terms of age, gender, race or language, at best might mask the implications of the research more broadly across the academy and at worst recreate a deficit or study skills model (cf. Lea & Street, 1998). There is, then, a case for a pedagogy of course design based on the research into academic literacies which is able to embrace much broader contexts of higher education, whatever courses are being followed and whatever the level of study.

It is common in higher education for the teaching of, or support for, student writing to be separated from mainstream study in learning support programmes or specialist foundation courses for undergraduates. There have also been successful
attempts to develop student writing in mainstream contexts through ‘Writing in the Discipline’ programmes. Such programmes—developed in the USA—approach the development of disciplinary knowledge through writing. This approach shares something in common with the work on academic literacies, since both conceptualize learning and writing in higher education as inseparable. However, whereas ‘Writing in the Discipline’ programmes focus on the writing requirements of particular disciplinary and subject areas, the approach being explicated here is more appropriate for the increasing number of interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary contexts, where students are undertaking courses based on a complex mix of disciplinary conventions and knowledge bases. Such courses are particularly common in professional or vocational areas of study, at both undergraduate and postgraduate level, although they are also popular in more academic areas, where they tend to be conceptualized as fields of study, for example, environmental studies and human sciences.

**Broadening the contexts for academic literacies research**

In whatever context, where attention to student writing is separated both from mainstream teaching and from other aspects of learning, the focus tends to be on one type of written text, the written assignment. This is presented conventionally as ‘the essay’. Research in the field of academic literacies has predominantly concentrated upon this product, the essay or similar assignment, and on students’ and tutors’ interpretation of its production. To date, less attention has been paid to the other texts which are involved in course design: course materials, guidance notes for students, web-based resources, feedback sheets, or even policy documents concerned with quality assessment procedures. The approach illustrated here requires course designers to consider a broad range of written texts implicated in a course, not just its assessed texts.

There are, in addition, other aspects of today’s higher education context which now need to be brought more centrally into the arena: the increasing use of ICTs in mainstream course delivery and the multimodal nature of texts, conceptualized as the move from page to screen (Snyder, 1997). Thesen (2001) explores these debates further in her examination of a course in humanities at a South African university. She argues that we need to move away from our attention to the verbal and acknowledge how different modes—visual and verbal—can interact with each other in new ways, which challenge our reliance on the written text in higher education. At a time when the use of new forms of text is increasingly prevalent and the use of virtual learning environments (VLEs) is becoming mainstream in course delivery in a range of contexts, the focus on the new communicative order (cf. Snyder, 2001), and upon multimodality, needs to be brought more firmly into the academic literacies framework.

These developments bring to the fore the possibilities for new kinds of texts in the learning process, but we need to exercise some caution about claims that image is replacing writing, as argued by Kress (2003). ICTs are being used extensively in higher education, but it could be argued that there is little evidence of a move to a
• Takes account of students’ present and previous literacy practices.
• Acknowledges that texts do more than represent knowledge.
• Recognizes the relationship between epistemology and the construction of knowledge through writing and reading practices, using both written and multimodal texts.
• Recognizes the gaps between students’ and tutors’ expectations and understanding of the texts involved in learning.
• Involves thinking about all texts of the course—written and multimodal—and not just assessed texts.
• Attempts to create spaces for exploration of different meanings and understandings by all course participants.
• Does not create a dichotomy between other literacies and academic literacies.
• Recognizes and builds upon issues of identity and how these are implicated in the creation of texts.
• Acknowledges the power dimensions of institutional structures and procedures and the ways that these are implicated in text production.
• Rather than trying to acculturate students into a discipline, attempts to see students as engaged participants in the practices and texts which they encounter during their study of the course.
• Sees the course as mediated by different participants. Allows spaces for this and embeds this in both the course content and the course design.
• Recognizes the integral nature of the relationship between literacies and technologies.

Figure 1. Principles of an approach to course design based on an ‘academic literacies’ model.

multimodal academic world. The dominant authoritative texts in higher education reflect the institutional concerns with knowledge and assessment, which are still—for the most part—instantiated in writing. It is advisable, then, to be cautious of explanations predicting the kinds of texts one might find associated with new technologies and new domains of visual design. The texts are an integral part of the institutional practices associated with them. When written text is dominant new technologies increase the speed of delivery and access to these texts but do not necessarily result in changes to the fundamental written nature of the texts themselves (cf. Lea, 2004).

A case study: an on-line course for postgraduate students

I suggest below some principles of course design based on the academic literacies model, which I hope will be generative to the broad contexts of higher education. Although I use one case study to explicate what this might look like in practice, my intention is to introduce some principles which practitioners will be able to adapt to their own course design and institutional context. In addition to using this case study in order to illustrate how these principles could be employed in course design, there is also some indication of their possible limitations. Space constraints make it impossible to explicate all features in detail, but Figure 1 lists the main elements of design and Figure 2 some possible limitations. If the research in academic literacies is to have relevance more broadly across the contrasting curriculum and contexts of higher education, then it is important to provide a space where educational develop-
• Recognition of institutional constraints on what is possible.
• Is it enough to try to be explicit about texts? Can one ever be explicit enough?
• Limitations of institutional assessment procedures.
• How is it possible to work within institutional constraints as a practitioner in contrast to a researcher, when research findings can critique in ways which might not be possible pedagogically?
• Can course designers utilize quality assurance procedures to their advantage, for example in the use of learning outcomes?
• Is it possible to go further than an ‘academic socialization’ model in course design?
• Do some disciplines, subjects, fields of study, lend themselves better to this approach?
• How do designers provide pedagogic spaces for exploration of all the different and contrasting textual practices that are involved in teaching and learning?

Figure 2. Possible limitations to an approach to course design based on an ‘academic literacies’ model.

ers, learning technologists—briefed to implement the use of ICT across the curriculum—and practitioner-researchers in academic literacies can be brought together. Rather than drawing on research data, I use a case study—by way of illustration—from a specific teaching context, where an attempt was made to embed these principles (see Figure 1) into the initial design of the course. Although an evaluation was carried out at the end of the first year of presentation, for reasons of anonymity and institutional confidentiality it is not possible to report here on the feedback collected from students. However, on the basis of this feedback some elements of the course have been changed for the next year of presentation, particularly with respect to assessment and to the possible routes of study through one particular block of the course.

This is a postgraduate course from the Open University, UK, first presented in 2002 and delivered globally, online, in English, to a diverse group of professional students, all of whom come to the course with very different backgrounds and experiences of post-compulsory education. The course is a 60 credit point course towards MA study (a third of an MA) and runs for eight months. The course materials were produced by a team of four academics who came from very different backgrounds: Philosophy of Education, Applied Linguistics, Social Science/Gender Studies and Adult Education. The external assessor and critical readers also brought different perspectives to the course, as they read and commented on course materials and resources in an iterative process. Where all the teaching and all the communication is in writing, or in multimodal texts of one form or another, and where there is no face-to-face communication for participants, issues of literacy, language and learning are inevitably pertinent to the teaching and learning context. Arguably this context gives a head start for the model of course design proposed here, since in a global online course, texts dominate, and, therefore, academic literacies may be more at the heart of teaching and learning than in any other context.

The course materials consist of: a specially written edited reader; three other set books; study guides to accompany each block; online resources, including links to relevant websites; access to web resources; access to conventional print-based journals online; access to electronic journals; the electronic tutor group activities and
debates. The students never meet each other or their tutor face to face. Instead they are placed in electronic tutor groups and use computer conferencing to debate course issues and work on activities together, online with others in their group. The tutor acts as facilitator in the online discussions but also acts as an authority, as the marker and assessor of students’ assignments. There is also a plenary conference where students can discuss course-wide issues with all the other participants on the course including their tutors and, in this first year, with the course team members who had been responsible for the design of the course. All communication is asynchronous and students have to adapt more familiar study practices to this context (cf. Lea, 2000, 2001; Goodfellow et al., 2004).

This context might be considered a very different forum from that usually associated with academic literacies research with its focus on the non-traditional student. On this course many students are already familiar with the discourses of higher education; many of them are already established members of a post-compulsory, professional education community, some holding postgraduate qualifications. Others are less familiar with the UK context of higher education, within which the course designers themselves are situated. However, despite working with what could be argued are an already privileged group of students, the fundamental issues of language, literacies and learning still predominate. We are still confronting issues of meaning, identity and power when we talk about academic literacies in this specific context. In addition, we are dealing with the added complexity of the integral relationship between literacies and technologies (cf. Snyder, 2001; Lea, 2004).

Content, knowledge and design

Academics and course designers need to know who their students are and what experiences they will be bringing to their studies. This involves a consideration of course design and development in terms of the textual practices students are most familiar with, and how these might relate to the practices which they will be engaged in during the study of any particular course. Tutors need to find out as much as they can about students’ prior experiences of writing, of reading, and also, in this instance, of using ICTs. They have to stand back from assuming that these will easily map onto the practices students engage in as participants in the course. The course design needs to incorporate attention to the practices students bring from other contexts, both of work and previous study, and also to acknowledge how the textual demands of this course might sit with other more familiar literacy practices. In terms of this case study the course team knew that the students had already studied to first degree level, and some at postgraduate level. The course requires students to be conversant already or become quickly familiar with discourses common in social science and education. Yet the students were as likely to have a background in, for example, the natural sciences, languages or computer science. The course team attempted to explicate these kinds of issues in the course materials in order to help students recognize some of the disjunctures they might experience (see Figure 3).
Text A: Introduction to study

You may or may not be new to postgraduate study, you may or may not be familiar with this particular field of study. You may already have experience of studying in other UK higher education institutions, or you may be more familiar with other contexts of higher education, maybe in your own country. Your own subject area may seem rather distant from educational technology. You may or may not have English as your first language. All these factors, and of course many others, will be implicated in your orientation to study, and the varied experiences that you bring to this course will be an asset—not just to you—but to others on the course. The course team has tried to build upon this diversity in our students, in order to make your learning experience as positive and productive as possible.

Figure 3. Extract from study guide for block 1 of the course.

The ‘content’ of a course, for example, its reading lists, lecture notes (nowadays often found posted on the departmental website) and course materials, can easily become reified as repositories of received knowledge. There is, however, increasing recognition that the construction of knowledge is a dialogic process, as students mediate the texts through their own personal readings and understandings of the materials they encounter through their study of a course (cf. Ivanić, 1998; Lea, 1998; Lillis, 2001). In addition, the increased use, by students, of resources mediated by ICTs has implications for the status of different types of texts in the representation of knowledge, since course content is no longer confined to the books and articles indicated on course reading lists. In some contexts students are now as likely to follow a weblink for a course resource as they are to borrow a book or journal article from the university library.

In order to understand more about the ways in which students negotiate and remediate texts, designers have to move away from conceptualizing course content as repositories of received knowledge, and recognize the relationship between epistemology and the construction of knowledge through textual practices. For some years researchers have illustrated the ways in which disciplinary bodies of knowledge are constructed through the writing practices associated with particular disciplines (Bazerman, 1981; Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995), yet courses are informed increasingly by many contrasting disciplinary ‘ways of knowing’, rather than one clearly defined disciplinary frame. Consequently, it is important that course designers attempt to be more explicit about the ways in which their course is constructed through particular textual practices, which may or may not be familiar to students on the course. Students may be unfamiliar with the kinds of texts they encounter in their studies more generally, and not only in terms of assessment. They may need space for discussion of some of the less obvious principles which underlie the texts they encounter during a course. In this instance the course team indicated some of the difficulties they predicted students might have if they were not familiar already with social science and education discourses (see Figure 4).

The course team built into the course an explicit recognition of the complexity of the texts students will encounter during their study; in addition, students are reminded of the contrasts between the different texts (see Figure 5). The text in Figure 5
Text B: New discourses and genres
The interdisciplinary nature of your study in Block 1, and indeed in later blocks in the course, may well be challenging for you as a student studying this course. Unless you have a background in education or the social sciences, more broadly, you may find the ways of writing that you encounter rather different from those you are used to. Many of you will be new to the disciplinary perspectives explored here, so the ‘prompts to study’ are provided as props to help you in working with what may be unfamiliar discourses and written styles (genres) … … At the beginning of your study of this block you might find some of the readings quite difficult. You will probably start to notice differences in style both between the two Set Books and between any articles that you access via the web resources for the course. They may all seem very different from the kinds of written texts you are used to reading for your day-to-day work: for example, academic articles in your own field or work-based reports. Depending on your background and whether English is your first language, you may or may not have very much experience of reading academic texts in English. If you find yourself having difficulties with some of the readings at the beginning then you might find the following strategy useful …

Figure 4. Extract from study guide for block 1 of the course.

comes from the study guide for the third block of the course when students have already been studying the course for five months.

Discussions around assessment
In recognition of the possible gaps between students’ and tutors’ interpretation of the assessment task, the course team discussed at length the best way of devising and wording the assessment criteria. As a result of these discussions they came to the conclusion that they would avoid associating a numerical mark with a specific criterion for assessment, for example, ‘development of coherent argument’ (20

Text C: Different types of texts
We now come to the main text for this block. This reading is your (and the authors’ own) introduction to Edwards and Usher’s book: Globalisation and Pedagogy. We have chosen this book for the course because we feel that it deals with the issues of teaching/learning and globalisation in an extensive and theoretical way. You will find a number of other good collections about education and globalisation, but none we felt articulated the theoretical framework in such a thorough and extensive fashion. The book is also an excellent contrast in style and methodology to other works you are reading in this Block, for example, Perraton. The chosen readings taken together give you a wide experience of different kinds of texts and writing styles.
… By this block you will be quite familiar with three of the set books. The four texts are not only different in focus: some are theoretical, some descriptive, but they are also very different in style. We know that the new text we have chosen for this Block, Globalisation and Pedagogy. Space Place and Identity, London, Routledge, 2000, by Edwards and Usher, is written in a style that could be very unfamiliar to many of you, and consequently difficult to understand. It uses a style adopted by many writers who are concerned to deconstruct (and reconstruct) our understanding; in this case our understanding of flexible and distributed learning in a globalised world. The authors describe their intention for the book as: to ‘survey the outlines of a theoretical terrain rather than present a detailed picture of pedagogic practices’ (p. 7). You will need to approach the book differently from the texts you have studied so far in the course, engaging more directly with the way it ‘plays with’ language and meaning, calling both into question.

Figure 5. Extracts from study guide for block 3 of the course.
Text D: Assessment guidance to students

This tutor marked assignment (TMA) is linked to your tutor group activities for Block 1. In these you will have explored online with your colleagues present-day directions in post-compulsory learning, in terms of the relationships between different forms and contexts of open, distance and flexible learning.

What will your tutor be looking for?

- TMA 01 is worded in what we call a ‘traditional essay format’. This is a common form of assessment in the field of education and the social sciences but it may differ from the types of assessment that are more familiar to you. Note the use of the term ‘critically examine’. This means that you are asked to address the question from an exploratory and a questioning perspective. It will not be enough merely to report on or describe what you have found in the course and its resources.

- To gain high marks for TMA 01, you will need to take a critical approach to these materials, putting forward different perspectives and points of view and using them as evidence in support of your own argument. You will need to explore contrasting interpretations in the course materials. In order to develop a well argued position in your TMA, you need to think about the different understandings of open, distance and flexible learning that you have encountered in your study of Block 1.

- In a conventional essay format the writer develops an argument with reference to academic published works. In TMA 01 you will draw on a wider range of resources in support of your argument. This TMA differs from other essay-type questions that you might have encountered before in that your tutor will be looking for evidence that you have drawn on resources from across the complete range of course materials available to you. These include the readings, the web-based resources and materials and, in addition, the debates that you have engaged in during the tutor group activities.

- In marking TMA 01 your tutor will be looking for evidence that you have drawn on a range of resources from the course materials in Block 1 in order to address the TMA question.

- Your tutor will expect you to develop a coherent argument of your own and to support this with reference to appropriate and relevant sources.

- You will need to convince your tutor that you have engaged critically with the resources that you are using and can show links between them.

- In developing your argument in the TMA, your tutor will expect you to demonstrate an awareness of the value of the conference debates that have taken place in your tutor group. In order to do this, you may need to make specific reference in your TMA to relevant messages in your tutor group debates. You may want to use these messages either to support your own position and/or to present an alternative position.

- Your tutor will expect to see evidence in your TMA that you have drawn on more than one institutional context.

Figure 6. Extract from course assignment guide.

marks). They adopted a more discursive approach to the criteria, and instead of explicitly naming these as ‘criteria for assessment’, they explored them under the heading, ‘What will your tutor be looking for’ (see Figure 6).

This decision resulted in vigorous computer conference discussion, in which some students voiced their dissatisfaction with the approach to assessment. The general feeling was that they were looking for assessment criteria which were similar to those adopted in other courses in the same programme. They asked the tutors for the allocation of marks as percentages attached to a small number of simple criteria for assessment. The attempts of the course team to adopt a more discursive and interpretative approach to assessment, which acknowledged the inherent limitations
of apportioning objective numerical grading to what are, inevitably, subjective assessments of the criteria, had failed from the students’ perspective. This experience has some similarities with findings in academic literacies research, where students conceptualize their problems with writing in ways which feel familiar to them, in terms of the surface features of grammar, spelling and punctuation, rather than with respect to deeper epistemological issues concerned with writing the discipline. In this instance students requested what they saw as an objective marking scheme, even though the implementation of the criteria themselves as a highly subjective process could, arguably, be laid open to much deeper scrutiny.

It could be argued that some of the approaches being explicated here would fit more comfortably into an ‘academic socialization’ approach rather than an academic literacies approach. When writing guidance and support materials for students it is easy to be apparently explicit about the discourses or written genres students are expected to engage in during their study, but it is more difficult to help students to work with their own meanings and construction of knowledge. This seems to be an inherent and somewhat irresolvable tension. Arguably, the integration of ICTs and, in particular, the use of VLEs in course design goes some way towards addressing this dilemma, by offering students the opportunity for electronic debate and discussion and, additionally, providing a permanent record of these which can be accessed repeatedly by students throughout their studies.

**ICTs and academic literacies**

ICTs can help us to think about writing and learning in different ways. In this case study asynchronous computer conference debates are seen as integral to the course content. Students are encouraged to draw upon these in their assignments, giving opportunities for alternative voices to be heard, both in students’ written conference messages and in student assessment. By foregrounding the tutor group debates as important texts, which also form an integral part of assessment, we are able to give authority to students’ voices, to their own cultural and linguistic identities, and not only to those of authoritative published works (see Figure 7).

The use of VLEs is now becoming commonplace in higher education, offering new spaces for learning through writing. An email list could also serve a similar purpose to those of conference debates in VLEs, in providing the permanence of the written text and the opportunities for reflectivity which students report they find useful when they are returning to an electronic debate at a later date (cf. Lea, 2001). However, it is not only VLEs which offer these opportunities. Although often a more private and personal text, the use of learning journals can give students the opportunity to engage in processes of reflectivity, and to see how their approach to a subject area has changed and developed over time. Learning journals also provide spaces for ‘transitional’ writing (Creme, 2001), acting as a bridge between a student’s personal understanding of the subject and their formal assessed work. Computer conference discussions can serve a similar function; both types of texts acknowledge students’ active participation in meaning-making and knowledge construction.

However, despite opportunities of this type which are opening up new spaces for
**Text E: Using computer conferences**

One of the main resources available to you will be the computer conference debates that take place in your electronic tutor group. These are central to your study of this course. The tutor group activities will form the basis for many of your debates about the readings and other web-based course materials. In these activities you will be asked to build upon your understanding of what you have read, through debating with others and, therefore, refining and building upon your own knowledge base. Debates are an integral resource for getting to grips with and understanding the concepts and issues explored in your studies. You may be more or less familiar with using this kind of medium for debating and exploring ideas, and it might take you some time to feel comfortable putting forward your views in the conference. The more you feel that you can contribute to the debates, the more you are likely to get out of them for your own studies. You will also find that you are expected to make use of debates rehearsed in the conference in some of the TMAs (tutor marked assignments). The exact ways in which you will be asked to do this are indicated in the Assignment Guide. The important thing to remember is that these are not just add-on discussions but debates that are integral to your study and to increasing your understanding of the other course resources, as well as being a resource in their own right.

![Figure 7. Extract from study guide to block 1.](image)

For Debates, some students' structures have more visual, some more written. Writing is a kind of thinking and writing, the institutional frameworks within which they sit remain unchanged. There are, of course, opportunities for experimentation with the use of new textual forms in courses and assessment. The question remains as to whether the use of these often apparently egalitarian spaces—which tend to position the tutor as facilitator—really change the nature of the power and authority dimensions of writing and learning, which have been highlighted in academic literacies research. The tutor still remains the final arbiter of the quality of the students' work. The role of the online tutor can be both as a facilitator and as an authority—an academic gatekeeper. In some respects a course of this type is able to offer spaces for different voices to be heard and valued. For example, in the case study, web-based resources referred to and posted by students in conference discussions during the first year have been added to the course resources for new students to access in subsequent years.

Within the design of this course it has been possible to foreground other types of text, rather than concentrate on the conventional academic publication or student written assignment. Students draw widely on web resources during their study of the course. In addition, attention to visual or multimodal texts has been foregrounded through requiring students to provide both a written paper and a visual presentation for their final assessed project. Since students are studying at a distance they cannot make a real presentation to a real audience and be assessed on this contribution. However, they are asked to submit overhead transparencies or PowerPoint slides. Individual students are also able to choose one of two weightings for the relationship between the written and visual elements of the project: either 45% for the paper and 35% for the visual, or 60% for the paper and 20% for the visual. This is an explicit attempt to acknowledge the different literacy practices which are of most relevance for students in their own linguistic, cultural and professional context, and how these might relate to their study and assessment on this course. The other components of the final project include an abstract and appendices. The appendices
require a personal reflective sketch concerning their journey through the course, which is a response to an online tutor group activity in the final weeks of the course. Students also have to attach as an appendix the feedback received from their tutor on their draft final project. Engaging in a range of different literacy practices is, therefore, implicitly embedded in this final piece of work since students are required to work with a number of different texts: an abstract; a paper; a visual presentation; a personal sketch; tutor feedback on their draft final project.

**Limitations in practice**

Exploring and outlining a set of principles for course design includes examining their possible limitations (see Figure 2). This is particularly so where the principles have been derived in the first instance from research. Educational researchers are able to use the findings of their research to offer a critique to present understandings of practice. Critiques of this kind can enable issues which have remained hidden to become visible. Academic literacies research has brought to the fore the different ways in which student writing is conceptualized across the university, and offers alternative frameworks for understanding how this writing is related to deeper questions of epistemology, including what counts as knowledge and who has control over the production of that knowledge. In contrast, course designers and educational developers may find it difficult to implement critique in terms of their own practice, where they are constrained by the institutional procedures and practices of which they are a part.

For example, an academic literacies researcher might be able to use linguistic analysis to point to the differing interpretations of concepts such as ‘structure’ and ‘argument’ across fields of study. In contrast, a university teacher may be required to use a departmental feedback sheet on which ‘structure’ and ‘argument’ feature in a list of tick boxes, designed to both systemize marking procedures and make them more transparent to the student. In such circumstances there is little, if any, time or space for the exploration of deeper epistemological issues surrounding this practice, either between tutors or between tutors and students. Nevertheless, it is still possible to be innovative in using particular practices to one’s own advantage in a specific context. For example, where a department specifies the use of a particular form of documentation for giving student feedback, this could additionally be used as the basis for a written dialogue between tutor and student. The student could respond to the feedback in writing, indicating where there was a lack of understanding and asking for further clarification. The document then forms the basis of a very different kind of written conversation than that required for the purposes of departmental audit. Similarly, in this case study students took advantage of the online relationship they had with their tutors to enter into email correspondence with them about the feedback they had received on their assignments.

Some of the limitations we faced were with respect to the university’s assessment procedures, which somewhat limited possibilities for experimenting with more innovative design. Course design will always be limited by specific institutional procedures and, additionally, by wider quality assurance procedures. The move
Text F: Using ‘aims’ and ‘learning outcomes’

• To introduce you to study at postgraduate level, which involves integrating different technologies for learning and teaching, including print, computer conference debates and the web. (Block 1 Aim)
• You will have used the conference debates to critically explore issues and arguments generated by both readings and web resources, and used these debates in the construction of your own knowledge and understanding. (Block 2 Learning Outcome)
• You will have actively engaged in a range of writing practices. (Block 2 Learning Outcome)
• You will have become increasingly practised in presenting your ideas in ways that reflect an awareness of diverse audiences and purposes. (Block 4 Learning Outcome)

Figure 8. Aims and learning outcomes specified for various blocks of the course.

towards an outcomes-based curriculum could also be seen as a limitation to implementing principles based on attention to academic literacies in mainstream course delivery. The need for rigour and documentation at every stage of the course design, delivery and assessment process could be seen as a hindrance to a design which focused on the contested nature of knowledge, the construction of meaning through textual practices and issues of student identity. On the other hand, these systems can also be incorporated and used to the advantage of the course designers. In this instance, institutional attention to course aims and learning outcomes gave the course team the opportunity to embed attention to academic literacies in specified aims and learning outcomes (see Figure 8).

Conclusion

It might be argued that the texts used as exemplars here are not unlike similar texts being used in other more conventional face-to-face contexts with postgraduate students in higher education. However, I use these texts here as a way of illustrating and bringing to the fore the relationship between academic literacies research and its implications for teaching and course design; what is important is the way in which texts informed by research principles can be acted upon in a particular context. What I am suggesting is the need to embed the knowledge that we have gained from research in the field of academic literacies and student writing into mainstream course design, across the broad curriculum of higher education. This includes a more complex understanding of the different ways in which the participants in the teaching and learning process—both students and academic staff—interpret and engage with all the texts associated with study, not just written assignments. Issues of negotiating meaning-making, language and identity, which were first identified in research with non-traditional undergraduate students, are implicated in the broader teaching and learning contexts of higher education. For example, when academic staff become positioned as students, as in the case study explored above, experience as a lecturer—in, for example, mathematics and computer sciences—charged to learn more about web-based course delivery, does not necessarily equip this individual for study of a postgraduate course in education, with its roots in the social sciences. The literacy practices s/he brings from familiar contexts are unlikely to sit easily with this new arena where s/he now finds herself as a student.
I argue that—as course designers—we need to recognize that engaging in new and familiar literacy practices is an integral part of engaging in institutional practices and processes as part of successful study, whatever the course, whatever the level, whatever the types of texts and whatever the technologies used to mediate these texts. How one engages in these depends not merely upon a tacit knowledge of the workings of the institution, its discourse and genres, but a more contested understanding of what it means to participate, within different contexts and for different purposes, as both students and tutors. Despite some limitations, it is possible to embed the principles which have emerged from research into academic literacies into course design across a range of contexts in higher education. These can help address and deal with the inherent tensions between students’ own ways of making meaning through texts and the received bodies of long-established knowledge that constitute any subject or discipline. There will always be tensions at this intersection and, arguably, it is here that new forms of academic knowledge and understanding come into play, as disciplinary boundaries are changing and vocational courses jostle with academic subjects in an increasingly technologically mediated, higher education arena. The principles of this approach mean that students themselves are drawn into this space as participants in the construction of knowledge—through their active engagement with texts—and that course design can aid this process and, therefore, ultimately, enhance learning for all concerned.

References


