Student Writing as ‘Academic Literacies’: Drawing on Bakhtin to Move from Critique to Design

Theresa Lillis
Centre for Language and Communication, The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes MK7 6AA, UK

A body of research has recently emerged in the UK which adopts an ‘academic literacies’ stance towards student writing. An ‘academic literacies’ stance conceptualises student writing as a socially situated discourse practice which is ideologically inscribed (Jones et al., 1999; Lea & Street, 1998). 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, 1998, 2000) which can actively contribute to student writing pedagogy as both theory and practice. My aim in this paper is to work towards opening up a design space built on academic literacies critique. To do so, I draw on Bakhtin’s work on dialogism (Bakhtin, 1981, 1984) and my research with a group of ‘non-traditional’ student-writers and their specific experiences of academic writing within a number of academic disciplines (Lillis, 2001). I map out the different levels of dialogism in Bakhtin’s work and illustrate the way these are, and are not, enacted currently in student writing pedagogy. I conclude by calling for dialogue, rather than monologue or dialectic, to be at the centre of an academic literacies stance and briefly outline some design implications of a dialogic approach to student writing pedagogy.

Context and Aims of This Paper

In the UK we are in the process of shifting from an elite to a mass higher education system where there is greater cultural, linguistic and social diversity than in the past. Current students in higher education have a wide range of life experiences and interests, as well as different reasons for wanting to participate in higher education and complex patterns of participation (for official figures and brief overview, see HEFCE, 2001). Given the changing nature of the student body within the context of official support for widening access and lifelong learning, there is an opportunity to develop a higher education premised upon the explicit aims of inclusion and diversity. Existing institutional and pedagogical practices, however, do not necessarily meet these aims. Indeed, the focus of this paper is on the ways in which one key higher education practice, student academic writing and the pedagogy in which it is embedded, seems to thwart opportunities for a higher education premised upon inclusion and diversity.

Drawing on work within the area of ‘academic literacies’, which has provided a significant critique of the dominant discourse on academic writing in higher education, in this paper I set out to do the following:

- To offer a brief overview of the different approaches to student academic writing in higher education in the UK, the conceptualisations of language implicit in them and their relationship to the broader institutional goals of
higher education. In particular I want to signal the monologic nature of the academic writing that is required from students and the pedagogy in which it is embedded. I include here a significant strand emerging from a critical perspective, critical language awareness (CLA) (see for example Clark et al., 1991; Clark & Ivanic, 1999) which, whilst problematising conventional approaches to student academic writing (and reading), tends to continue to work from within a monologic frame.

- To draw on ‘academic literacies’ critique in order to construct a design space, focusing in particular on the importance of dialogue. I draw on two particular sources for placing dialogue at the centre of this move towards design: Bakhtin’s work on dialogism and my research over a period of some six years with a group of ‘non-traditional’ student-writers in the UK.
- To call for dialogue rather than monologue or dialectic to be at the centre of an academic literacies stance, briefly indicating important sites of dialogue emerging from student-writers’ perspectives. A concern throughout the paper will be to explain why I define ‘dialectic’ approaches to student writing as predominantly ‘monologic’, and to explain the distinction I make between ‘monologic-dialectic’ and dialogic approaches to meaning making in student academic writing.

Student Writing in Higher Education in the UK: Current Approaches

What kinds of approaches to student academic writing currently exist and how do these reflect and enact particular goals for higher education? In Table 1 I draw on the work of several researchers to outline the main approaches to student academic writing, currently visible in the UK. The categories in the third column, approaches to student writing, are taken from Lea and Street (1998) and Ivanic (1999). Lea and Street have offered a three levelled model for theorising approaches to student writing in HE, now widely referred to within the UK context, defined as skills, socialisation and academic literacies. These are marked as (a), (c) and (e) in the table. Ivanic (1999) has provided categories which correspond in some ways to those of Lea and Street, as well as introducing others not explicitly included in their model; these are what are referred to in the table as creative self-expression and socialisation (2). The differences between these approaches are briefly indicated in Table 1 in terms of the ‘theories of language they embody’ (Ivanic, 1999), their relative status within higher education and their relation to the broad goals of higher education, which I have marked as monologic or dialogic. I explore the meanings of monologic and dialogic, drawn from Bakhtin (1981, 1984, 1986) below, but in relation to the goals of higher education these can broadly be glossed as follows: the goals of higher education can be described as monologic where the institutional and pedagogic practices are oriented to the reproduction of official discourses of knowledge; in contrast, the goals of higher education can be described as dialogic where pedagogic practices are oriented towards making visible/challenging/playing with official and unofficial discourse. Monologic goals signal a conception of the higher education community as broadly homogeneous, whereas dialogic goals are in keeping with the notion of an acknowledged heterogeneous community of participants.
### Table 1: Approaches to student writing in higher education (UK)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status within Higher Education, UK</th>
<th>Theory of language</th>
<th>Student writing pedagogy'</th>
<th>Goal of higher education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dominant</td>
<td>Language as a transparent and autonomous system, the elements of which are acquired by individuals.</td>
<td>(a) Skills – explicit teaching of discrete elements of language.</td>
<td>Practices oriented to the reproduction of official discourses: <em>Monologic</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oppositional</td>
<td>Language as discourse practices which learners will/must gradually come to learn implicitly.</td>
<td>(b) Creative self-expression-teaching as facilitating individual expression.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Language as genres which are characterised by specific clusters of linguistic features.</td>
<td>(c) Socialisation (1) teaching as (implicit) induction into established discourse practices.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Language as socially situated discourse practices which are ideologically inscribed.</td>
<td>(d) Socialisation (2) explicit teaching of features of academic genres.</td>
<td>Dialogic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(e) Academic Literacies – what are the implications for pedagogy?</td>
<td>Practices oriented towards making visible/challenging/playing with official and unofficial discourse practices: <em>Dialogic</em> – what are the implications for pedagogy?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Academic Literacies as Critique

The main point I wish to emphasise for the purposes of the discussion here is that whilst categories (a) to (d) in the table are intended to be descriptive as to current approaches to student writing pedagogy in higher education, the last category, (e), works as critique, that is, it serves as an oppositional frame to conventional approaches to student writing. An ‘academic literacies’ approach emphasises the socially situated and ideological nature of student academic writing and in this way serves as a lens through which the nature of the former approaches is made visible. So, for example, whilst a ‘skills’ approach to writing, with its implicit model of language as a transparent medium, is often taken as the only or ‘common sense’ way of thinking about communication/writing in official discourse, the academic literacies frame enables us to see that a skills
approach represents one particular, albeit a powerful, way of conceptualising language, literacy and student writing in higher education (see discussion in Jones et al., 1999: introduction). The academic literacies frame has helped to foreground many dimensions to student academic writing which had previously remained invisible or had been ignored; these include the impact of power relations on student writing, the centrality of identity in academic writing, academic writing as ideologically inscribed knowledge construction, the nature of generic academic, as well as disciplinary specific, writing practices (see e.g. Jones et al., 1999; Lea & Stierer, 1999; Lea & Street, 1998).

**Academic Literacies as Design: From Monologism to Dialogism**

‘Academic literacies’ has proved to be highly generative as a critical research frame, but as a design frame it has yet to be developed. I am using ‘design’ here in the broad sense of the application of research generated understandings to pedagogy. I will outline how this broad sense of design connects with Kress’s particular notion of design in relation to critique below. The point I want to make here is simply that, to date, little explicit attention has been paid to exploring how an academic literacies stance might inform the theory and practice of student writing pedagogy. Perhaps the nearest example yet of what might be considered a design response to academic literacies critique can be found in the notion and practice of critical language awareness (CLA), coined by Clark et al. (1990) and developed in the work of higher education teacher-researchers in the UK and by others in different parts of the world, notably in South Africa (for UK developments see Clark, 1992; Clark & Ivanic, 1997; Wallace, 1999; for South Africa, see Janks, 1999; Thesen, 1997; for Singapore, see Kramer-Dahl, 2001). This pedagogical approach, drawing explicitly on critical discourse analysis, involves consciousness-raising amongst learners about power and ideology in relation to language use (for recent overview see Clark & Ivanic, 1999). Academic literacies research/ers share many of the same preoccupations as CLA researcher/ers, often share similar intellectual roots and, indeed, in some cases are the same people. But, apart from the small amount of CLA work which tends to hover at the margins of the academy, particularly within the UK context (within specifically designated language/literacy areas of the curriculum such as writing support, critical language awareness courses, English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses) there has been little to suggest how we might enact understandings generated from an academic literacies’ stance within disciplinary areas of the curriculum in higher education more broadly.

In any case, and of more fundamental concern to me in this paper, is CLA the design we should be looking towards? I am increasingly coming to see that CLA tends to share one of the major limitations of more conventional writing pedagogy within higher education. By this I mean, briefly – and I speak as someone interested in and who has drawn on CLA work – that meaning making continues to be construed as monologic, with an emphasis on a single, unified version of truth. This is evident in terms of CLA’s own theoretical and pedagogical framing:

- **Theoretical framing:** CLA tends to work from within a dialectic approach to meaning making. By ‘dialectic’ here I’m referring to traditions of reasoning informing CLA work which emphasise the following: (a) synthesis as
the goal of meaning making, and (b) a version of dialectic governed by binary framings where one version of truth is privileged over others. I return to both of these dimensions below, but for the moment here wish to point to CLA’s emphasis on binaries. Consider such ‘either/or’ framings in accounts of CLA – such as dominant/dominated (groups), oppressive/non-oppressive (practices), dominant/oppositional (practices, forces), existing/alternative (conventions). These binary framings have continued to inform much work in CLA, including my own (see e.g. Clark & Ivanic, 1999; Clark et al. 1990, 1991; Lillis, 1997).

- **Pedagogical framing:** CLA tends to assume that an (already critical) expert is engaged in raising awareness of an (as yet uncritical) student about language, power and ideology. In this sense, there is a danger that CLA pedagogy, like more conventional pedagogy, privileges only the tutor/institution’s perspectives and denies students’ contributions to, and struggles around, meaning making. Consider, for example, Clark and Ivanic’s (1999: 67) aims as stated in a recent editorial introduction to CLA where the ‘we’ and ‘they’ is clearly signalled: ‘We aim to help students become more aware of the complex relationship between the institution, discourse, social power relations, identities and agency in shaping these practices’. Within this framing, it is the tutor who still holds the main responsibility for posing the problem to which she is assumed to know the answer; the tutor thus maintains her position as ‘interpreter of the world’ (Reynolds in Lather, 1991: 59).

Aspects of the latter element, pedagogy, have been problematised (see e.g. Thesen, 1997) but have not to date been explicitly linked to the former, theory. Yet these elements are interrelated and arise in part, I think, from staying within a **critique** rather than a **design** conceptual space. Kress usefully foregrounds a distinction between critique and design at an epistemological level in the following way:

Design rests on a chain of processes of which critique ... is one: it can, however, no longer be the focal one, or be the major goal of textual practices. Critique leaves the initial definition of the domain of analysis to the past, to past production. (Kress, 2000: 160)

And he explicitly builds into this more creative force of epistemology-as-design the interests of actual designers, that is the users of language: ‘Design shapes the future through deliberate deployment of representational resources in the designer’s interest’ (Kress, 1998: 77).

Many points arise from Kress’s comments. Here I want to point to three challenges they throw out to those of us who are researchers/teachers in the area of student academic writing and which certainly need to be addressed in developing an academic literacies approach. First, the epistemological shift from critique to design emphasises the need for researchers to find ways of drawing on critique without being bound to the conceptual framework governing the object of that critique. Second, design signals the need for researchers, teachers and student-writers to imagine new possibilities for meaning making in academic writing. Third, and closely bound up with the first and second point above, is the need for researchers and teachers to engage with the interests of actual designers,
in this case the interests of student-writers, and place these centrally within student writing research and pedagogy. The importance attached by Kress to actual designers’ interests echoes the commitment in much adult literacy research and practice to valuing participants’ perspectives (see e.g. Hamilton, 1994), which in turn signals the fundamental importance of dialogue in writing research and pedagogy; for, without dialogue how else do researchers/teachers find out about participants’ interests and work to support, rather than control, their meaning making? At the same time, a focus on design emphasises the need to take an imaginative leap away from conventional ways of thinking about meaning making in academia. A key argument that I make in this paper is that through valuing participants’ perspectives, specific examples of such imaginative leaps become visible, and hence possible to build into student writing.

Designing Dialogue, Step 1: Theorising Different Levels of Dialogism

In turning to dialogue, I want to focus on the work of Bakhtin. But in doing so I am aware, as Halasek points out, that we need to treat both the work of Bakhtin and the notion of dialogue with some care. Talking of the way in which Bakhtin’s work and, more specifically, dialogue is referred to in the influential student writing research site of US composition, Halasek (1999: 3) writes:

The dialogic – as metaphor, as philosophy, and as practice – has been elevated to the level of a ‘god’ term in the discipline (US composition studies), and as such, it has become at once ossified, transparent, and irrecoverable. The meaning of the term, however ambiguous, is infrequently interrogated: it has achieved, at least at this moment both denotative and connotative purity, as well as an unquestioned position within composition studies.

Put simply, Bakhtin and the dialogic are being used to mean many things, or perhaps worse, to mean very little. So, because I do not take dialogue as a transparent notion I want to outline explicitly how I understand and am using Bakhtin’s work here.

First of all, it is important to note that Bakhtin’s work is relevant to attempts to move away from critique and towards design because his work on the nature of language and meaning making is not only descriptive, but is also ideal: dialogue is central to Bakhtin’s description of the nature of human language as he understands it, but is also an idealisation as to how he thinks human communication, activity and meaning making could be. Secondly, and relatedly, there are, at the least, two fundamental levels to dialogue in Bakhtin’s work which need to be acknowledged, as outlined in Table 2.

At the first level, dialogue can be said to be a ‘given’, that is, an all-pervasive dimension to human language and communication. So, for example, talking at this descriptive level (Level 1 in Table 2), Bakhtin says:

The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue. (Bakhtin, 1981: 276)
Table 2 Levels of dialogue/ism in Bakhtin

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level 1: Dialogue as a ‘given’</th>
<th>All utterances</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Descriptive</em> as to the nature of language</td>
<td>• are dialogic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• involve addressivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• are part of a chain of communication</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level 2: Dialogue as something to struggle for</th>
<th>All utterances involve a tension between <em>centrifugal</em>/<em>centripetal</em> cultural forces and <em>authoritative</em>/<em>internally</em> persuasive discourses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Ideal</em> as to the nature of language in human communication</td>
<td>• Centripetal-<em>monologism</em> – one truth, one voice, one identity, binary logic, authoritative discourse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Centrifugal-<em>dialogism</em> – many truths, many voices, many identities, hybridity, internally persuasive discourse</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This is how language is. Language, far from being a static entity, with fixed meanings, as is implied in a dictionary for example, is a living, social phenomenon dynamically carrying and contributing to the meanings that can be made. The ways in which specific utterances mean depends on the particular *addressivity* – briefly, who is being addressed, what is being addressed – and the particular meanings, or *accents* that wordings develop within specific sociohistorical contexts. This is what Bakhtin means by language always being a part of a *chain of communication*: wordings do not exist in isolation.

However, it is clear from Bakhtin’s writings that, at another level, dialogue is not a given but is an ideal to be worked for, against the forces of monologism (Level 2 in Table 2). This is evident in Bakhtin’s emphasis on *centripetal* v. *centrifugal* forces at work within society, the former being the drive to impose one version of truth, the latter involving a range of possible truths and interpretations. These map closely on to Bakhtin’s notions of *authoritative* and *internally persuasive discourse*, which he uses to signal the different kinds of relationship the individual has with ideas and wordings.

The authoritative word demands that we acknowledge it, that we make it our own: it binds us, quite independent of any power it might have to persuade us internally: we encounter it with its authority already fused to it – it demands our unconditional allegiance. (Bakhtin, 1981: 343)

Authoritative discourses seek to impose particular meanings and are therefore monologic in nature. These stand in contrast to internally persuasive discourses, which are ways of meaning with which the individual has dialogically engaged, that is, questioning, exploring, connecting, in order to develop a newer way to mean (Bakhtin, 1981: 346). In this sense, dialogue is an ideological stance towards meaning making and selfhood:

Nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free, everything is still in the future and will always be in the future (Bakhtin, 1984: 166)
Bakhtin’s notion of dialogue at this level is the process by which newer ways to mean, and to be, can come into existence and, as such, dialogue stands in contrast to monologue and monologisation.

This second level radically challenges not only the more obvious monologue practices surrounding student academic writing (for example, the standard practice of the tutor setting an essay question to which the student responds in accordance with the knowledge that has been authorised in lectures, seminars and course materials) but also a key dimension of the epistemology upon which the Western academy is founded, that is, on a particular version of dialectic, a ‘monologic-dialectic’ from a Bakhtian perspective. There are ongoing debates about Bakhtin’s critique of dialectic, including the extent to which his notion of dialogue is distinct from Hegelian or Marxist dialectic. It is not possible to do justice to the debates here but it is important to attempt to tease out some key aspects of the relationship between dialectic and dialogic in Bakhtin’s thinking.

Dialectic is clearly part of Bakhtin’s theory of dialogue/ism where dialectic means tension, struggle, difference. Tension is a pervasive theme in his works, for example in his focus on centripetal and centrifugal forces, and on the struggle the individual faces in trying to take control over meaning making, by making words one’s own. Dialectic as process is therefore clearly a part of Bakhtin’s theory of dialogue/ism. However, he is critical of dialectic in the following ways:

1. Where the ultimate goal of dialectic is synthesis, through the progressive negation of one statement by another (thesis/antithesis). Here differences are subsumed into a unified, integrated position. Bakhtin’s interest, in contrast, is to maintain difference always in play.

2. Where the processes towards synthesis are construed as a movement towards ever greater abstraction. Bakhtin’s emphasis throughout his works is on the concrete, actual utterance which is socially and historically situated and saturated.

3. Where dialectic as process is conceptualised through a binary lens. Bakhtin eschews any simple binaries, emphasising instead difference and constant interplay of wordings, meanings and consciousness.

(1) and (2) above are perhaps more obviously identifiable as monologic in Bakhtin’s framework: (1) signals the importance of unity rather than difference as the goal of meaning making, and (2) is an aspect of (1). (3) is monologic in Bakhtian terms because of the reduction of complexity and difference to only two elements in an either/or relationship, rather than an attempt to work with many elements at any one time.

The radical challenge that Bakhtin’s theory of dialogue/ism represents to meaning making practices within formal education often goes unacknowledged, with discussions of his notion of dialogue/ism tending to stay at Level 1 in Table 2. Yet Bakhtin’s emphasis on the encounter between difference, on communication and knowledge making built on a dialogic both/and rather than a dialectic either/or stands in sharp contrast to much academic meaning making. Dialogue within this frame is not just the process of meaning making, but is rather the goal; difference always kept in play.

In attempting to move from critique towards design in this paper, I am particularly concerned with this second level of dialogue, which is often hidden or
ignored in writings and discussions about approaches to student writing and which, I am arguing, needs to be foregrounded in academic literacies’ work.

**Designing Dialogue, Step 2: Identifying Dialogue in Student Writing Practices**

**Dialogue as a ‘given’**

I want now to turn to the relevance of the foregoing discussion to actual instances of student writing. In doing so, it may seem that I am simply reading ‘data’ through a particular ‘theory’. However, the linear construction of this paper should not mask the recursive nature of knowledge making; it is through ongoing participation in discussions with student-writers that particular theorists (in this case Bakhtin) have become more significant for me as I have worked to explore and make sense of the writers’ experiences of meaning making.

Below are two essay questions and extracts from essays written by Mary and Sara. They are drawn from my research over a period of some six years which focuses on the experiences of writing in higher education of a group of ‘non-traditional’ students. Briefly, the research has involved carrying out literacy history interviews and collecting drafts of texts written in a number of disciplinary areas as well as related and relevant institutional documents. Central to the research process have been cyclical discussions with student-writers about their texts over an extended period of time, within the context of their shifting patterns of participation in higher education (see Lillis, 2001 for fuller discussion).

The essay question and extract in Example 1 are from a first year undergraduate course in Society and Politics, part of a Combined Studies degree. The essay was written by Mary during her second year of higher education.

**Example 1**

**Essay question: Does the term ‘underclass’ adequately describe the social position of ethnic minorities in British society?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Extract from final draft of Mary’s essay</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Although ethnic minorities do represent an underclass in relation to what has been discussed above. They have made a significant contribution to the culture of British society despite all the negative research concerning their social restrictions in society. For example, during the 60’s when the ‘flower power’ movement emerged, this was popular culture amongst the white middle class youth. They were often students between the ages of 18 and 25 in full time education. Their pursuance of Asian philosophy, a doctrine which preached ‘peace and love’ brought about political radicalism … Black youth culture has also had a dramatic effect upon white youths, especially through the influence of music.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The essay question and extract in Example 2 are from a first year undergraduate course in child development, part of a Psychology degree. The essay was written by Sara during her second year in higher education, but her first year in psychology.
Example 2

Essay question: Give a brief account of studies which investigate the changing nature of children’s friendships, outlining both the methods used and key findings. Discuss how these findings relate to Mead’s view of social development.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Extract from Sara’s essay</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Corsaro (1985, as cited by Miel, 1990) used observational methods to study children’s conversations with friends in their natural environments at nursery and home. ... It was discovered that children’s views on friendship and social behaviour were complicated and became apparent through their use of language. Corsaro found that friendship was used as a tool to gain access to groups of children, to strengthen groups performing the same activity, and to exclude children outside of the group. The result supports Selman’s findings at stage 0 where children only see friendship being formed during mutual activity.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The extracts from Mary and Sarah’s texts are clearly ‘dialogic’ at Bakhtin’s Level 1 in the following ways:

- Most obviously they are dialogic in that they are responses to questions: of course they are a specific kind of response to a specific kind of question which we’ll come back to.
- Addressivity is most evident here in the sense that the student-writers are responding to a tutor, a department, a discipline and at a broader level the context of higher education.
- Language as a chain of communication is evident in these texts where they *ventriloquate* or echo conversations across academic and disciplinary contexts. Lexical items point to the discipline specific nature of the students’ texts: in Example 1 the use of ‘underclass’, ‘British society’, ‘social’, ‘political radicalism’, ‘youth culture’ stand in contrast to the use of specific wordings in Example 2, ‘observational methods’, ‘natural environments’, ‘Corsaro found’, ‘Selman’s findings’. These lexical differences in the extracts from Mary and Sara’s texts are realisations of different rhetorical practices in the two (broadly speaking) discipline areas of sociology and psychology. At a rhetorical level, the emphasis in the sociology text is on mobilising evidence to support an argument, whereas the emphasis rhetorically in the psychology text is on empirical evidence speaking for itself, as it were.8

The student-writers’ texts are therefore ‘dialogic’ at the first Bakhtinian level, outlined in Table 2.

**Dialogue as something to struggle for**

However, it is far more problematic to describe these texts as dialogic at Bakhtin’s second level, that of meaning making as the encounter between difference. Indeed, if we bring student-writers’ perspectives into our discussion, rather than simply focus on their written texts, what we find is that monologue is what tends to prevail.
Re-read the extract from Mary’s essay above and then consider the following comment written by the tutor on this section of Mary’s text:

Not really relevant

Many comments were written by the tutor on this essay, but this one is particularly significant to Mary. Most obviously, this is a categorical statement, albeit hedged, (not unusual in tutor commentary on student texts) indicating the tutor’s position that this particular section should not constitute part of a response to the essay question. There is no attempt to open up why Mary included this particular section but rather the tutor claims authority over what’s going on/should go on in this text.

However, if we consider Mary’s comments about academic writing and this essay in particular, it is possible to see the significance, and hence the relevance of this section to her. Mary is a Black working-class student who left school with few formal qualifications and, after a number of different jobs and courses, began her studies in higher education at the age of 21. She had never considered that higher education was anything to do with her, but when her mum began an Access (to higher education) course, Mary re-considered. She said she thought it (university) could be a place for me. I used, I always thought I was really stupid. I thought I can’t do this, I can’t do that, I can’t, can’t, can’t. But then I thought well my mum can do it.9

Mary has a strong sense that being at university is particularly difficult because of who she is, a Black working-class woman. Language is central to her concerns and raises particular issues for her when she sits down to write. In a discussion about writing in academia she compares the difficulties she faces to that of a white middle class student in the same course:

He doesn’t have to make a switch. It’s him you see. Whereas when I’m writing I don’t know who it is (laughs). It’s not me. And that’s why I think it’s awful, I think it’s awful you know. It’s not me at all. It’s like I have to go into a different person. I have to change my frame of mind and you know, my way of thinking and everything. It’s just like a stranger, it’s like I’ve got two bodies in my head, and two personalities and there’s conflict.

Such general feelings do not remain separate from specific acts of writing and decisions about what will / can(not) be written. In relation to the specific essay on the underclass, Mary talks of being tired of the negative representations of Black people. By ‘negative representations’ she is referring to the many sociological indicators of the discrimination and disadvantage suffered by Black people, documented and discussed in her sociology books; for example in relation to employment, housing, and school achievement. Whilst acknowledging these as real, Mary would like to make clear in some way, the contributions of Black people to British society:

Everything they say about black people in sociology books is all negative anyway. You must know that. So trying to find arguments that are based around positive contributions is very, very difficult.
She knows that she must regulate the comments that she would like to make in this essay:

There’s loads of bloody things I want to say in that essay and they won’t want to hear – I was going to say ‘we bloody built your country on our blood’ (laughs). Industrialisation were based on the economics of slavery.

In the end, Mary decides to devote a small section of her 2000 word essay to saying something about the contribution of Black people to British culture, which is the extract reproduced above and the one the tutor identifies in the whole of her essay as being ‘not really relevant’.

Let’s now turn to the second example. There were no tutor comments on this specific extract and Sara achieved a good grade. So, the essay, exemplified in this extract, was successful in institutional terms. However, if we consider Sara’s text alongside Sara’s talk about the writing of this essay, we discover what she might have liked to include.

Sara, ever since she began studying in higher education some six years ago, has been grappling with her mainstream academic interests in education and, primarily, psychology, and her commitment to Islam. Being a Muslim, Pakistani-British and a working-class woman have often been explicitly linked by Sara to her struggles around writing in academia. She has been clear from her first year in higher education that she must be careful about, in her words, letting the Pakistani side coming out in her writing. After her first year in higher education, where she achieved a distinction, she decided to leave because she felt there seemed to be no space for connection between the academic world and her interests.

I’ve realised that I want to find out about myself, about Islam . . . courses don’t let you do that. You have to learn what other people think. There’s no space to think about what you want.

Sara was (is) committed to Islam – a wonderful religion – and wanted to deepen her understanding. She was also clear that Islam had little to do with teachings advocated by what she referred to as the backward molvis (Muslim priests) of her local Pakistani community. Thus, in order to develop her understandings of Islam, Sara took up a correspondence course in Islamic Studies through the Muslim Parliament of Great Britain. This involved reading specific texts and writing assignments over a period of a year, during which she explored Islamic beliefs, practices and history.

Having completed this course, some two years later Sara returned to higher education and took up her longstanding interest in psychology and, whilst highly motivated, continued to struggle to balance her spiritual and academic interests. Although she constantly dialogues with herself about spirituality and rationalist academic discourse, what she produces in her written texts is, in Bakhtin’s terms, authoritative discourse; that is, what she knows will be accepted within the specific context of writing at Level 1 in psychology. When discussing the specific essay on social development, Sara commented:

There’s two sides to me, there’s the theoretical side and the very spiritual side. Two of me you see, and I was thinking, my God, I could link this into psychology, cause it’s (referring to a book on spirituality) talking about the self, the true
you in other words. And I thought, my God, I’m studying the self at the moment, you know, from childhood and there’s so many things. And I thought, I could bring them together, you know, they sort of intertwine and I thought, it’s so interesting. And I thought, if I put that in my assignment, they’ll think (laughs) what’s she talking about, this woman? … They’ll think I’m crackers. They’ll think (pause, lowers tone of voice) ‘fail’. So I think I can’t put that in then.

Unlike Mary, Sara doesn’t risk bringing together two discourses which the academy considers as incompatible. She doesn’t risk the possibility of dialogic encounter.

Conclusion: Some Design Implications of a Dialogic Approach to Student Writing

The principal aim in writing this paper has been to explore how an academic literacies approach to student writing can develop from its current position as ‘critique’, towards ‘design’. I have argued that an important theoretical step is needed, which involves a move away from a monologic-dialectic perspective on meaning making towards a Bakhtinian notion of dialogue. Experiences recounted by student-writers and exemplified here suggest that a dialogic approach to meaning making is something they desire. So, what might be some design implications for student writing pedagogy?

- **Talkback not feedback on students’ written texts**

One relatively simple way of involving students in decisions about the kinds of meanings they might wish to make in their academic writing, and thus a shift towards a more dialogic approach, is to reconceptualise the widespread practice of ‘feedback’ as ‘talkback’. ‘Feedback’ typically has the following features: a focus on the student’s written text as a product, a tendency towards closed commentary, including evaluative language such as ‘good’, weak, etc. Talkback, in contrast, would involve focusing on the student’s text in process, an acknowledgment of the partial nature of any text and hence the range of potential meanings, an attempt to open up space where the student-writer can say what she likes and doesn’t like about her writing. Such ‘talkback’ has been illustrated here in the comments by two student-writers.

- **Open up disciplinary content to ‘external’ interests and influences**

An important point to bear in mind in considering the specific instances of two students’ writing above is that neither student wants one ‘truth’ in place of another. Mary wants to write about the discrimination experienced by Black/ minority ethnic groups in Britain, part of which can be done through an exploration of sociological categories such as ‘underclass’, but she also wants to point to the significant contribution by Black individuals and groups to, indeed the construction of, a range of British cultural practices. Sara wants to know about Western psychology; she wants access to this available knowledge and enjoys it. But she would like to be able to bring together this Western empiricist discourse with discourses emerging from her spiritual reading and daily life practices. In an ever growing higher education system premised upon notions of widening
access and lifelong learning, there is a need to re-examine what counts as relevant knowledge within and across academic disciplines.

- **Open up academic writing conventions to newer ways to mean**

Whilst there are some indications of a wider number of genres being used in higher education (see e.g. Ganobcsik-Williams, 2001), student academic writing overwhelmingly involves essay writing. And this essay writing is of a very particular kind, with an emphasis on logical argument with a rigid notion of textual and semantic unity (for useful discussion of essayist literacy, see Scollon & Scollon, 1981). If we take into account the student-writers’ desires for meaning making, we would be advised to reconsider the kind of unity that is privileged in academia. The student-writers who took part in the research project expressed the desire to make meaning through logic and emotion, argument and poetry, impersonal and personal constructions of text. In these ways the student-writers seem to echo Bakhtin’s emphasis on meaning making as the encounter between difference, on constructing meanings which keep such difference in play. They indicate that the bringing together of different discourses is something they desire in their making of new meanings in academia, and thus exemplify the potential creative force of hybridity/hybrid texts which are, Bakhtin (1981: 36) says: ‘pregnant with potential for new world views, with new ‘internal forms’ for perceiving the world in words’.

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**Correspondence**

Any correspondence should be directed to Theresa Lillis, Centre for Language and Communication, The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes MK7 6AA, UK (t.m.lillis@open.ac.uk).

**Notes**

1. I have not included ‘process’ as a writing approach as I’m signalling here different epistemological positions on student writing. A process approach is often linked to the notion of writing as creative self-expression, as in (b) in the table. However, ‘process’ as a pedagogy, with an emphasis on drafting, planning, revising can be connected with any of the approaches in the table.

2. I think it is important to emphasise that my comments are based on accounts of CLA in which the theoretical framing may often do not do justice to the dialogic practices in which researcher-teachers actually engage. I’m thinking here of the way in which Clark and Ivanič’s writings continue to theorise tutor/student relations around writing as consciousness raising activity of the student, even though their frequent insistence on collaborative research publications testifies to a dialogic practice. I think that
in pedagogic practice, CLA practitioners are often grappling towards dialogue, whilst still theorising their practice as a fundamentally dialectic / expert-to-novice activity.

3. There are of course ongoing debates about the levels at which it is acceptable to interpret Bakhtin’s writings, including the extent to which it is possible to ‘read’ Bakhtin’s theory of language as, broadly speaking, an emancipatory political theory. See discussion in Hirschkop (1999).

4. There are ongoing debates about Bakhtin’s critique of dialectic, including the extent to which his notion of dialogue is distinct from Hegelian or Marxist dialectic. The first two critiques of dialectic in the list here are often seen as evidence of Bakhtin’s anti-Hegelian stance, as evident in the discussion in Holquist (1990:75 ff), whereas the third is seen as anti-Marxist, as indicated in Morson and Emerson in Gardiner (2000).

Bakhtin himself says little explicitly about his perspective. One of the few explicit comments he made – in note form – and where he is clearly pointing to the significance attached to abstraction in dialectics is as follows: ‘Dialogue and Dialectics. Take a dialogue and remove the voices (the partitioning of voices), remove the intonation (emotional and individualizing ones), carve out abstract concepts and judgements from living words and responses, cram everything into one abstract consciousness – and that’s how you get dialects.’ (Bakhtin, 1986: 147).

5. It is what Bakhtin says of dialogue/ism, rather than what he explicitly says about dialectic, that is informing my discussion in this paper.

6. For one of the few examples of engagement with what I am calling here the second level of Bakhtinian dialogue in language and literacy education, see Haworth (1999) in her focus on group interaction in primary schools. See also Wegerif (1999) for a Bakhtinian informed critique of monologic reasoning in primary classrooms.

7. Although these were first year undergraduate courses, these were not first year undergraduate students. Both Mary and Sara had studied other courses (and passed) at Level 1 but for a number of reasons decided not to continue with those particular studies and/or at a particular moment in time.

8. These different lexical items map on to a distinction made by MacDonald between phenomenal grammatical subjects and epistemic grammatical subjects. See MacDonald (1992); see also Hewings (1999).

9. For further discussion, see Lillis (2001).

References


