A NEW MODEL NEEDED FOR TEACHING ACADEMIC WRITING

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Introduction

As I was in the process of writing this paper, I got an email from my programme coordinator that the first-year writing programme at the University of the West Indies, Cave Hill (henceforth, UWI, Cave Hill), formerly known as the Foundation Language Programme, would now be called the 'Academic Literacies Programme.' The change came after a quality assurance review which was completed in the last academic year (2016-2017). I am pleased about this change since, in researching different approaches to teaching academic writing out of my own dissatisfaction with my own students' results over the years, I felt that the academic literacies model, as theorised by Mary Lea and Brian Street is most suitable for adoption in the programme in which I teach, even if some elements of it cannot be wholly adopted for reasons that will be discussed later. Over the course of my university teaching career I have examined my own pedagogical approaches, through informal reflection and discussion with colleagues, and in formal education contexts such as courses within the postgraduate teaching certificate programme for staff at the University of the West Indies, Cave Hill, but I had not gone so far as to question my own assumptions concerning the nature of academic writing itself.

The 'Writing in the Disciplines' Approach

One approach to addressing teaching academic writing skills is the writing in the disciplines model that has been embraced by many university programmes in the United Kingdom. The philosophy behind this model is expressed by Jonathan Monroe, who questions who owns writing in higher education. He argues that in "pretending to offer a more universal understanding of what good writing is, single course writing requirements do a disservice to students and faculty alike; they persuade students that acts of writing are anything but situational and multiple" (5). Monroe asserts that the individual disciplines and the institutions in which they are situated should determine what writing is appropriate and how it ought to be assessed. In this model, teaching academic writing is not the primary responsibility of teaching staff who look exclusively at writing matters, but is integral to the teaching of any discipline.

While I can see the validity in Monroe's assertion that context must be taken into account in teaching writing, and the experts within the disciplines determine what they consider to be the most appropriate forms of expression within their disciplines, satisfaction has not been guaranteed with the writing skills of graduates even though they have produced good enough writing to pass their various university courses. In fact, the creation of writing programmes within universities all over the world arose, in large part, because it was noted that students were not sufficiently learning how to write well with the instruction within the discipline-specific courses they were taking. Within my own institution (UWI, Cave Hill), in workshops for staff facilitated by instructors within the Academic Literacies Programme, as it is now known, many lecturers have expressed that they do not pay attention to issues of expression and structure, and do not have the time to address such elements along with the regular content of their courses.

In addition, the benefits of viewing and approaching academic writing as a process rather than an act was not something that was dealt with explicitly in most courses. The extent to which teachers within the various disciplines cared to address students' writing process is questionable at best. Problems in student writing lie not only in their

understanding of what they read within the academy and their ability to demonstrate competence in writing for various academic disciplines, but in their approach to writing for formal contexts generally. For this reason, I do not think that a purely writing in the disciplines approach is the most desirable direction for my institution, and I am glad that the institution apparently sees it that way.

The 'Academic Literacies' Approach

Mary Lea and Brian Street, drawing on "theories of reading, writing and literacy as social practices" (Lea and Street 2006, 368), challenge traditional approaches to teaching writing in higher education, particularly within the United Kingdom. They argue that there are three overlapping models/approaches to student writing and literacy: "(a) a study skills model, (b) an academic socialisation model, and (c) an academic literacies model" (368). They assert that the study skills model treats challenges with student leaning "as a kind of pathology" in which there are problems to be fixed, and that the model assumes "literacy is a set of atomised skills" to be learned and possible later transferred to other contexts by students (Lea and Street 1998, 158-159).   On the academic socialisation model, Lea and Street state that it "is concerned with students' acculturation into disciplinary and subject-based discourses and genres" (Lea and Street 2006, 369). They further argue that while in this model there is some acknowledgement of differences in the requirements of various disciplines, "institutional practices, including processes of change and the exercise of power, do not seem to be sufficiently theorised" (Lea and Street 1998, 159). In so doing, the complexity of reading, writing and the use of language in producing and representing knowledge is misrepresented within this model (159).

The third model, academic literacies, addresses the perceived shortcomings of the academic socialisation model by foregrounding academic culture as complex social practices involving issues of "meaning making, identity, power, and authority" (Lea and Street 2006, 369). It highlights that students need to be fluid in moving between various academic genres and modes, and emphasises that the differences between them must be made explicit (370). Lea and Street argue that the academic literacies model is superior in helping students to understand and cope with academic writing tasks in higher education. They further assert that both student and teacher perspectives on academic writing must be considered, without presumptions on which party's practices are more appropriate or effective, to truly gain an understanding of the nature of academic writing (Lea and Street 1998, 158). Lea and Street opine that rather than trying to establish differences between what constitutes good and bad writing, greater insights into the nature of academic literacy are to be gained through analysing literacy as a social and cultural practice and approaching meanings in academic writing as contested (158).

Students in higher education need to develop reading and writing competencies for various subject disciplines as part of their entry into academic communities (Lea and Street 1998, 159; Bloxham and West 79). As Sharran Clarence and Sioux McKenna point out, "there are differences that stem from how each discipline imagines and constructs itself, how it has developed, and how specialists within it continue its growth and development" (39). This results in students having to be fluid in switching writing practices from one setting to another (Lea and Street 1998, 159). For this reason, advocates of the academic literacies model argue that there is need for dialogue and even collaboration with teaching staff across the institution to ensure that the needs of students are being met within the writing courses and within each subject area.

The writing programme in which I teach largely falls within what Lea and Street call the academic socialisation model. The programme's offerings are as follows:
- *Exposition for Academic Purposes* (formerly called 'English for Academic Purposes')

      caters to students in the Faculties of Humanities and Education, Science and Technology and Social Sciences;

- *An Introduction to Argument* (formerly 'Language: Argument') is taken by students in the Humanities and Law faculties;
- *Introduction to Creative Non-Fiction* (formerly 'Rhetoric I: the Writing Process') caters to Humanities and Education students only;
- *An Introduction to Professional Writing* (formerly 'Rhetoric II: Writing for Special Purposes') is taken by students in the Faculty of Social Sciences and Faculty of Science and Technology, as well as Psychology students within the Faculty of Humanities and Education.

Although the four courses are aimed at students from specific faculties and there is collaboration between writing instructors and librarians in teaching information literacy skills, close collaboration between lecturers in various disciplines across campus and the writing instructor does not exist. For those courses taken by students within two or more faculties, the instructors try to set topics that may be relevant to as wide a spread of disciplines across the faculties as possible. For example, in what was formerly called 'English for Academic Purposes' for two classes consisting of 40 students each, 38 of whom were in the Faculty of Social Sciences majoring in mainly business-related areas, I set topics concerning trade for the students' course work essays. The two other students, one from Humanities and Education and the other from Science and Technology may not have found the topics as relatable to studies within their major, but could still cope with the assignments. In spite of such efforts to make the courses relevant to what the students are studying, if there is a mix of students from various faculties, coming up with relatable topics can be challenging, although it must be noted that when given options, students frequently choose topics that have no relationship at all to what they are studying, even when more relevant topics are given as options. For example, during the second semester of the current academic year, teamwork was one of the broad topics I set for my three classes in what used to be 'English for Academic Purposes,' but none of the students studying computer science examined the use of teamwork within that field in spite of being strongly advised to do so. Students are advised but not forced to make the course relevant to their majors because of the existence of courses within some faculties that address writing within specific disciplines – for example, Legal Methods, Research and Writing I and II in the Faculty of Law – along with the belief that understanding some basic principles in the production of academic writing can be applied successfully across the academy. If the courses are to function as intended, forcing students to write on areas more relevant to their disciplines and collaborating more closely with subject experts may be a step in the right direction.

      Still, I believe that considering the above criticisms of interdisciplinary approaches to teaching academic writing, along with feedback from students which will be highlighted shortly, it would help to improve delivery of the courses aimed at teaching writing for the academy. To improve students' essay writing skills, a new theoretical approach which foregrounds the complexities of writing for academic purposes may be needed; however, a purely discipline-specific approach to teaching academic writing may not be necessary.

Epistemological Versus Linguistic Issues

In their analysis of the assertions of Lea and Street, Ursula Wingate and Christopher Tribble argue that the "problems that students experience with writing tend to be at the epistemological rather than at the linguistic level, and are often caused by gaps between academic staff expectations and student interpretations of what is involved in academic writing" (483). I question the extent to which such a clear demarcation can be made in

most cases regarding students' construction of knowledge and meaning, and the language used for such construction, but I think that the implications of the assertion are certainly worthy of further investigation. When students write, how can we, the teachers, be sure that we understand what they mean? If the knowledge constructed by the experts within the various disciplines is contested, it is also plausible that what students write is also contested.

Problems at university level with a large percentage Caribbean students' proficiency in writing and speaking standard English in academic context has been well established. Dennis R. Craig notes that this was the reason behind the establishment of what used to be called the 'Use of English Programmes' at the various campuses of the University of the West Indies (11), which as I stated earlier, has evolved into what is now called the Academic Literacies Programme. Over the years, I have often found what I think a student is trying to say on the page is different from (and better thought out than) what the student explains that he was trying to say during face-to-face individual conferencing sessions. It leads me to question that extent to which sometimes examiners interpret what we believe students should be saying.

Still, I may be guilty of unduly dismissing what may be a legitimate complaint by some students over the years that they pass essay assignments for their various disciplines, but struggle to do as well, or even pass, the writing course they are taking within the Academic Literacies Programme, formerly known as the Foundation Language Programme. While not all teaching staff in the various disciplines analyse essay structure and apportion part of their assessment to linguistic issues, the problem may be much more complicated than this. If students are able to pass their writing assignments in various courses across disciplines, their writing is evidently satisfying the writing standards of experts within the various disciplines, making the students' complaints a worthy reason for further investigation. Believing that the writing standards set by the Academic Literacies Programme are higher than those set within the disciplines is not helpful in addressing the problem. It is well known that even within disciplines two teachers can have vastly different opinions on the quality of a given piece of writing, even when using a carefully constructed, analytical rubric. Standardisation of grading and second marking colleagues' students papers can lead to great debates before a final decision on the quality of a given paper can be decided on. Innumerable times throughout my 13-year teaching career, I have been party to or have witnessed such disagreements over what grade a paper should be awarded, so there should be no surprise that there is some discord between disciplines that are assessing student writing based on different criteria specific to each discipline. This is worsened by the fact that there is little or no dialogue occurring between teachers in the various disciplines and writing instructors. What might be considered as acceptable academic writing can be contested even between disciplines, resulting in students' confusion and frustration.

Wingate and Tribble acknowledge the value of the academic literacies model in "helping [students] to recognise that knowledge is constructed, rather than merely represented through writing" (484). This perspective could potentially open up a whole new understanding for students in terms of how to engage with what they read and even what they are doing as they construct their own knowledge through essay writing processes. One common lament among my colleagues in the Foundation Language Programme here at UWI, Cave Hill is the paucity of higher level thinking skills according to Bloom's taxonomy demonstrated in a significant number of our students' expository essays, especially. Recently, in revising our rubrics in a course titled English for Academic Purposes for the current academic year, adjustments were made that directed more of the examiners' attention to students' demonstration of analytical thinking. We agreed that developing students' higher order thinking skills must be a significant focus in our

teaching. In my experience, teaching the various strategies of exposition and how to use the writing process to improve final submissions have been inadequate in addressing the problem. Approaching academic writings as constructions rather than vehicles of knowledge could help them to be more critical about what they read and how information sources can be incorporated into their work as they seek to construct (for them) new knowledge.

From my students' perspective, a recurring complaint is the lack of research on things relating to the Caribbean context in which they live. In the course titled English for Academic Purposes, the students are given one or two broad topics from which they must find a narrow focus. To aid them with this, apart from in-class discussions and activities aimed at generating ideas for finding a focus, students' information research skills are addressed through a two-hour class facilitated by one of the librarians on campus. The session on information research skills introduces the students to the various library resources at their disposal as well as instructing them on how to build effective search strategies, with emphasis on students' use of language and the use of Boolean logic. Since students most often draw on research mainly originating in developed countries such as the USA, the UK, and Canada, their solution is often to write essays focussing on issues relevant to those developed countries, or uncritically assuming that knowledge generated from research done in those countries necessarily applies to the Caribbean context. Often, students admit that they find material on a given topic, but they do not understand what they read. Addressing these issues within the current pedagogic framework has yielded unsatisfactory results, in my opinion.

Collaborating with experts within the disciplines could help to alleviate these problems, as much of what students find are outside of my expertise (and that of many of my colleagues within the Academic Literacies Programme). Not only can they help students in coming up with topics in which they are likely to find research relating to the Caribbean context, but they could help students in understanding the relevance or lack thereof of the research based outside of the region that students find. Of course, the practical ways of doing all of this would have to be investigated and may require some experimentation. Although, I do not agree that the major problems in the student writing I have seen in my 13-year career are at epistemological level rather than the linguistic level, I do think that some important changes need to be made to the way that students are taught to understand writings in and for the academy.

A 'Discipline-Specific' Approach Versus an 'Interdisciplinary' Approach

As suggested earlier, students in higher education need to develop reading and writing competencies for various subject disciplines as part of their entry into academic communities (Lea and Street 1998, 159; Bloxham and West 79). As Sharran Clarence and Sioux McKenna point out, "there are differences that stem from how each discipline imagines and constructs itself, how it has developed, and how specialists within it continue its growth and development" (39). This results in the need for fluidity in students' adapting to the requirements of various disciplines (Lea and Street 1998, 159). Lea and Street refer to this adaptation as "course switching" (161) which, they argue, is akin to linguistic code switching (161). Lea and Street further suggest that as each discipline evokes its own meanings and identities that may result in challenges to students' own personal identities (159). Students are often unsure of how much of their own personal experiences and opinions should be included in their writing and Lea and Street rightly note that even whether to use the first person perspective could cause confusion.

Having a discipline-specific approach could work well in classes in which all students are studying the same thing. For example, since 2011 in the first semester of each

academic year, the course I teach which focusses on argumentative writing is almost exclusively made up of first year Law students. Because they share the same major and are taking the same law courses, it is practical to address some problems they may have with literacy in law. One colleague who also teaches the aforementioned argumentative writing course related her experience to me of having to help students in her class interpret what an essay question set by one law lecturer was asking of them. Students complained during one of her class discussions that they had difficulties interpreting desired responses to an essay question set in one of their law courses. She analysed the question with them to unpack the various other questions that the original question led to and which the students would have to address in order to give an adequate response to the original question. Unfortunately for the students, this was an isolated incident, since the original purpose of the discussion was not to address the students' confusion over the assignment. It is unlikely that a single discussion lasting a fraction of one class session was sufficient to address any problems they may have interpreting essay assignments for the remainder of their undergraduate careers.

One way of addressing the problem lies in having a joint assignment, for example, in which the subject expert focusses on matters pertaining to Law, while an expert in composition studies focuses on issues of structure and students' writing process. As it stands currently, the course is aimed primarily at teaching how to construct logical arguments, which is useful to students in not only their Law classes but also any other course they take in which they have to construct arguments. Recognising and avoiding informal fallacies is an important part of the course content which may not be dealt with to a large degree in any of their law courses. In this way, the law students see how informal fallacies and other issues dealt with in the course apply even beyond their major. Students often have a tendency to compartmentalise knowledge, and while there are many contexts in which doing so may be necessary, making explicit areas of commonality is also important.

Also to be considered are writing classes which consist of students from various faculties and disciplines. Although the courses and individual classes within those courses in the Academic Literacies Programme at UWI, Cave Hill were set up specifically to cater to students of the same faculty, if not individual discipline, when the programme was redesigned in 2005, the size of the student intake and the resulting financial concerns necessitated that students from different disciplines and faculties registered for the same class in the two most heavily subscribed courses. In such cases, coming up with topics, exercises and assessment tasks that would cater to them all is not possible, far less practical. Even offering flexibility in terms of formatting and citation styles can be cumbersome when assessing essay submissions. In such instances it is practical and necessary to focus on commonalities across the disciplines, identified by Jane Trapp as being analysis, criticism and argument based on evidence (712). Although there is certainly value in developing students' competencies in writing for specific disciplines, an interdisciplinary approach could still be effective if such common traits as well as differences are brought to students' attention. I think the most important criticism of the academic socialisation model is the idea that the complexities of academic writing must be made explicit so that knowledge is more accessible and therefore less confusing to students.

One element to be considered in highlighting the complexities of academic writing as social practice is designing courses at the right level. My students are undergraduates and the courses I teach are first-year foundation writing courses, so there is obviously a limit to the depth that can be covered concerning, for example, relationships of power between teachers and students in the construction of knowledge in any given discipline, for example. Such a topic would have far more meaning for a graduate student who, in

addition to having taken more classes, is getting supervision from a lecturer to complete a dissertation. Incorporating this theoretical approach into teaching academic writing offers possibilities for the development of writing courses at various levels throughout the academy.

Conclusion

Lotta Bergman rightly notes that to ensure "professional development and quality improvement" (518) in teaching, critical reflection is vital.   The critique offered by Lea and Street of traditional approaches to teaching academic writing in higher education certainly encourages one to question one's assumptions about academic writing and students' ability to satisfy various writing requirements across the disciplines with an interdisciplinary approach. The academic literacies model certainly has many elements which can and, I think, should be adopted by UWI, Cave Hill. However, considering the necessity of combining students from across various faculties and disciplines in the two biggest writing courses within the Academic Literacies Programme, having a discipline-specific approach does not seem feasible at this time. In terms of programme development in research and teaching at all levels of undergraduate and even postgraduate levels, we probably need to have our own adapted model of academic literacies.

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